



The
Self-Effacement
of
Malachi Joseph

Tomlinson



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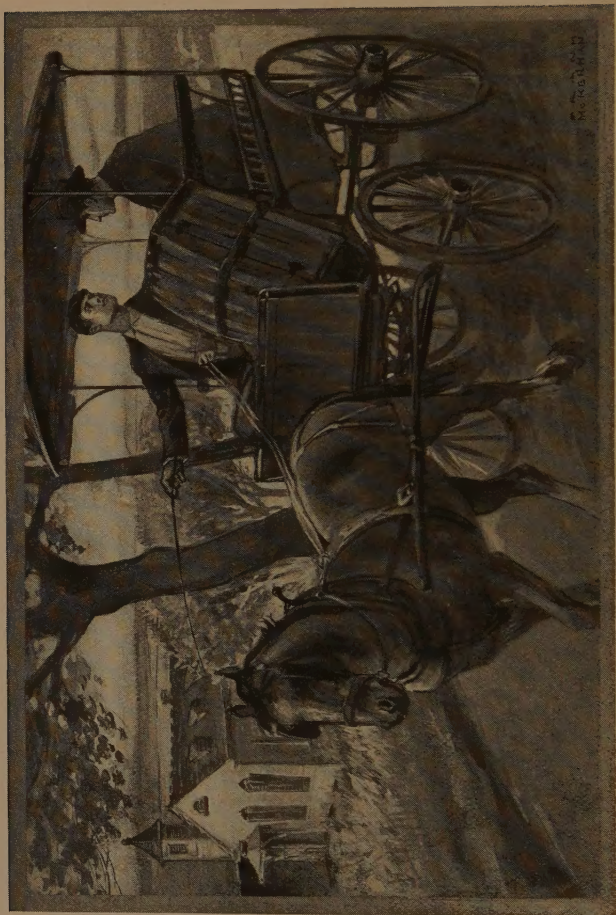
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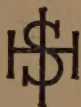
The Self-Effacement of Malachi Joseph

BY
EVERETT T. TOMLINSON

AUTHOR OF

"The Ward Hill Series," "The Winner Series," etc., etc.

*He that loseth his life for my sake shall
find it.—Jesus Christ*



Philadelphia
THE GRIFFITH & ROWLAND PRESS
1906

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Published September, 1906

From the Society's own Press

Preface

THE pressing problems of modern city life have received no small share of attention from earnest students of existing conditions. The influx of foreign-born peoples, the complications of business and social life, the temptations, the marvelous successes and the no less marvelous failures, though the last are not always heralded, have, in the urgency of their claims, somehow caused the problem of the remote village or hamlet to be ignored, if not forgotten.

Investigators have informed us of the steady drift from the country cityward, but the study of the sources of the life which supplies such a large percentage of successful men in the cities (and an equally large proportion of the failures, for only the exceptional man succeeds, whether he comes from country or city) has not received its due consideration.

This story in no way assumes to be a "study"—it modestly attempts simply to present certain conditions that hold in the life of the more remote villages. Quiet and peaceful surroundings do not always imply that strife is lacking.

The writer is of the opinion that the country

village as an element in the life of our great nation is worthy of a more careful study and appreciation than at present it receives. The tragical elements are not lacking, love and hate are as strong, hope and despair as keen there as in the great centers of trade, and the possibilities for good or evil are not less.

It would seem as if religious and social activities would count here too, if they once were given a fair trial. The call is certainly not less imperative, and neglect here means neglect of the source of many a stream. If the springs are purified the streams must be polluted afterward, if they are polluted at all.

The fields are as promising and many a time, if properly worked, bring even richer rewards than do many of the more densely populated regions. At least such is the belief of the writer, and in the story of Malachi Joseph's labors and rewards he has dealt mainly with facts that have come under his own observation.

If the story is enjoyed and a deeper interest in the conditions and possibilities of the country districts which are attempting to live on their past is aroused, the writer will feel that his labor has not been in vain.

EVERETT T. TOMLINSON.

ELIZABETH, N. J., August 1, 1906.

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THE SELF-EFFACEMENT OF MALACHI JOSEPH

CHAPTER I

A PROPOSITION

THE audience was slowly dispersing, for the exercises of the graduating class of the Pilgrim Theological Seminary were ended. Small groups still lingered in the aisles of the venerable church, whose walls for more than a century had echoed with the eloquence of outgoing classes, waiting to congratulate some one of the embryo clergymen or to bid farewell to a departing graduate.

With one accord the lingering listeners agreed that the oration of Malachi Joseph Pitt on "The Self-effacement of the Minister" had eclipsed all the addresses delivered on that evening in June, and they turned with a smile of pride or interest to

watch the young orator as he stood upon the edge of the platform leaning forward to acknowledge the congratulatory words of the people that filed past him. Apparently his own judgment as to the merits of his work did not differ from the unexpressed opinions of the people that were observing him. He was blandly smiling as he grasped the hands stretched up to him, and a benedictory flavor seemed to pervade the very tones of his voice, and even to extend to the white tie that adorned his neck.

In the eyes of professors, trustees, and friends Malachi Joseph Pitt was decidedly a promising man. His scholarship had been proved; his personality was gracious; and many prophesied that great things were in store for him. Among the prophets was Malachi Joseph himself, who with all his attainments was no Cassandra, and was confident that the world had outgrown the trite aphorism as to the prophet's honor in his own country. He was carefully dressed, his bearing was somewhat marked in its contrast with some of his plainer classmates, and among the twenty-four members of the graduating class there was none whose voice was more clear or whose features were more cleanly cut.

The oration on "The Self-effacement of the Minister" had produced a strong and even a profound

impression upon many in the audience. Trustees had listened approvingly, some of them sincerely moved by the evident earnestness of the speaker, and others, it may be, commending a line of action for others from which they felt themselves to be absolved. The vigor of the approval of these worthy men was almost as keen as their condemnation of certain sins to which they were in nowise inclined or even exposed. Selfishness was a vice to be abhorred even in the monopolizing of the greater good which had been promised the giver. For themselves they were content with the lesser blessedness of the recipient.

Professors had listened, interested and sympathetic; and, if there appeared upon the faces of some of the learned men a smile of satisfaction, as they glanced at one another with an expression that seemed to imply that this was a fair sample of their workmanship after a course of three years at the Pilgrim Seminary, no one who intercepted it disapproved; for the professors were men of gentle, almost childlike spirit, and were loved in the little city of Monroe for their own sake as well as for the sake of their works. And there was a local pride as well.

In the audience too, there were many whose shin-

ing faces clearly showed that the lofty sentiments of the impassioned young orator had produced a profound impression. Some, it is true, afterward declared that the young speaker was merely intoxicated with his own eloquence, for no young man could know of the things of which he had spoken without experience; and the sheltered life, as well as the youthful appearance, of Malachi Joseph Pitt proclaimed that he was both innocent and ignorant of the meaning of some of his glowing periods.

But Malachi Joseph had received the faith of his believers in the spirit of a little child, which was both natural and scriptural, but without ever a thought that there was any distinction between being taught and learning. He had studied the great doctrines, and had "learned" the meaning of the great forces that had moved mankind much as in his college days he had passed an examination in chemistry, or had prepared his work for the professor of Latin. That these things were vital, or that they were to be truly learned only in the school of life, when the examinations that had been so successfully passed in the school of the prophets did not at all uniformly solve the puzzling problems, he was as yet unconscious. Elated by his success, confident that in the seclusion of the sheltered life at

the seminary he had drawn in what was required to master all things, he had been honest and sincere in the preparation of his graduating oration.

With many a quotation from Browning and a frequent thrust at Herbert Spencer or David Hume (who were not present in person to respond), and with an occasional fall out of German philosophy and a word of praise (not too pronounced) for Plato and Confucius, Malachi Joseph had carried the most of his hearers with him as vividly he set forth the truth that the worker found his immortality as well as himself in his work.

The bones of the toilers, he declared, lie bleaching in the sands of time, but the stream of eternity bears their deeds onward. Men die, but their works follow them. Under the centuries the workers lie buried, forgotten as a dream; but on the foremost crest of the wave their labors are borne resistlessly forward. So David Livingstone had left behind him the promise of rewards, high in an earthly sense, and had buried himself in the heart of Africa. But to-day the Dark Continent was lifting its dusky hands in a prayer of thanksgiving for the unselfish devotion of the great Scotchman. So Henry Martyn, prize wrangler at Cambridge, had turned aside from the pomp and promise of power and place in

his English home land and, heeding the call from far-distant Persia, that had risen like the Macedonian cry of old, and would not be silenced, had yielded himself and gone to the godless land. But Henry Martyn's devoted deed had provided the heroic call to myriads of young men in the years that had intervened. So the greatest apostle of them all, Saul of Tarsus, had declared in words that still burn, in thoughts that still breathe, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself." And, when the speaker had quoted the sublime sentiments, the audience almost felt, as did Malachi Joseph himself, that it was difficult not to believe that the words and the power that was behind them were his own.

But more than by the general response of his audience the young orator had been aroused by the presence in the assembly of certain persons whom he had recognized in the sea of faces before him. In one place he had perceived Mr. Burt, and his presence had sent a thrill through Malachi Joseph's heart, for the man was chairman of the pulpit committee of the church in the thriving little city of Serena, where he had recently preached several times. The coming of the committeeman could have but one interpretation, and with the thought

Malachi Joseph redoubled his efforts, as he assured himself that he must do well before this visitor.

In another part of the audience he perceived Gertrude Bingham, and again his determination increased. A frequent visitor at her home throughout his student days in Monroe, Malachi Joseph had come to believe that his visits were at least not unwelcome. It was true that her home was one in which there was ever an interest manifest in the Pilgrim students, and others besides himself were frequent callers there; but the confidence of Malachi Joseph was in nowise dampened by the fact, for while self-effacement might be the theme of his oration, as a pronounced element in his life it had hitherto not been strikingly evident. The expression on the girl's face as she sat in her pew, leaning forward and evidently deeply interested, was inspiring. Cultured and beautiful she was, and her life in her home of wealth had apparently left her as unassuming and natural as a child, and even while he was speaking Malachi Joseph suddenly resolved that he would see her at the close of the exercises, for there was something he would say to her which he would no longer postpone.

On the opposite side of the audience he could see his little, worn, overworked mother, who with his

"Uncle Mal" and her best clothes had come from Turnerville that very day to be present at the graduation of her boy, an event even greater in her eyes than in his own. By her side was seated her brother, Malachi Joseph Bisbee, for whom she had cherished a love so strong that his very name had been bestowed upon her son, a heritage that the younger Malachi Joseph had bitterly resented with the passing of the years.

It was not that the generosity of Uncle Mal was not appreciated, for the man, unmarried, had at once assumed the burden of his sister's life when her husband had died of "the fever," and with her he had planned and saved and provided the means of paying the term bills which are among the few things left in the modern college curriculum that are not elective. But the man was uncouth, and his manner lacked refinement; and sometimes these things were so irritating to the younger Malachi Joseph that the recognition of the nobler part was somewhat ignored if not forgotten. "He is a good man, but——" Somehow the sentence invariably was left incomplete.

In the front row among the professors was Doctor Diggs, the one man among the faculty for whom Malachi Joseph cherished a feeling of dislike, a

feeling that was intensified by the smile apparent on the doctor's face as he sat listening to the glowing periods of the oration. The professor was a master in his department; there was no question as to his ability; but he was so brusque and direct in his manner, apparently so lacking in appreciation of the aims and tastes of some of his students, that even while Malachi Joseph was speaking his feeling of irritation increased, and for a moment he almost faltered; but his eyes again sought the face of Gertrude Bingham, and his confidence was quickly restored. It was true that the graduates of Pilgrim, on the occasion of their return to the seminary, were warm in their acknowledgment of the debt they owed the direct and earnest man; but Malachi Joseph was in no position to appreciate this. And the smile on Doctor Diggs' face was decidedly irritating.

The professor had lingered near the pulpit, conversing with some of his pupils of former years; and, when Malachi Joseph at last came down from the platform, he found Doctor Diggs directly before him.

"A very creditable oration, Pitt," remarked the professor.

"Thank you, Doctor," replied Malachi Joseph, dryly, for somehow he was irritated by the pro-

fessor's manner, so different from the glowing tributes he had received from others.

"Oh, it will do. It will do. We don't expect as much from a man when he is twenty-four as we do from him when we can reverse the figures." Ignoring the flush that appeared on Malachi Joseph's face, the professor quickly added, "I want to see you, Pitt."

"You don't have to look very far away to do that, Doctor."

"No. It's something important. Will you walk home with me? Ah, yes," Doctor Diggs added dryly, as he followed the uneasy glance of Malachi Joseph across the church to the place where Miss Bingham was standing. "'Where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.' Brass buttons and white ties! I can't understand what it is about them that makes them so powerful with a certain part of humanity. Never mind. I'll say it right here." The hair on the head of Doctor Diggs stood upright, heavy and only slightly tinged with gray; but it gave a certain leonine impression to his strong, smoothly-shaven face. Only the eyes, tender and expressive as a woman's, relieved the severe cast of his features, and his heart was known to be as tender as a child's.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"I've a letter from Acton. They want a minister there."

"Where is Acton? I don't think I ever heard of it."

"It's a little town of three or four hundred people up in the northern part of the State. It's three miles from the railroad, and the church is so run down they haven't much more than a name to live. It's not surprising that you have never heard of it, but will you go?" he added abruptly.

"Why, Doctor—I couldn't—I hadn't thought of it. I don't know that I'm fitted for the work there. Besides, there was a committee here from Serena——"

"Yes, I know it. They'll call you there."

"They will?" inquired Malachi Joseph eagerly.

"Not a doubt of it."

"Do you think a man has a right to hide his candle under a bushel?"

"Candle under a pint cup, and room enough to be lost in, then!"

"I'll think about it," said Malachi Joseph uneasily.

"That's just what I'm afraid you *won't* do. You're a man that never ought to have alternatives.

Tell me, Pitt, will you honestly think it over, and decide the question on its merits?"

"How long do you want me to take?"

"A month."

"Yes, Doctor, I'll let you know at the end of a month."

"Now I've just one thing more to say, Pitt. Acton will give you the best place in the world in which to efface yourself." Ignoring the hot flush that quickly spread over Malachi Joseph's face, the professor continued: "It's the work, not the worker, that counts. And yet you'll *find yourself* in Acton much sooner than you will in Serena. Besides, you owe something."

"I haven't a debt in Monroe!"

"Yes, you have, and to every creature, to all the world. You've been helped and lifted and—coddled, I was going to say. Now pay it back like a man! Be a free man, Pitt, whatever else you become."

"Why can't I pay back in Serena?" demanded Malachi Joseph almost indignantly.

"I won't detain you any longer," said Doctor Diggs abruptly. "Good-by, Pitt," he added, extending his hand as he spoke. "Remember you're to write to me within a month, whatever you decide."

Malachi Joseph hastily returned the grasp, and then abruptly started toward the pew in which Gertrude Bingham was still standing with others that had not as yet departed from the church.

CHAPTER II

AN OFFER

"I CONGRATULATE you, Mr. Pitt, exclaimed Gertrude Bingham as the young orator approached.

"Thank you! Thank you!" responded Malachi Joseph warmly. "That's what I've been waiting for."

"You must not be too easily satisfied," laughed the girl as she turned away preparatory to joining her mother, who was waiting in the vestibule.

"Are you going to ride home?" inquired Malachi Joseph quickly.

"I had expected to."

"If you'll wait I'll go with you."

"Thank you," responded Gertrude Bingham smilingly. "The inducement of the company of the orator of the evening is not to be lightly disregarded. I'll tell mother, so that she need not wait any longer."

"And I'll speak to my mother too."

Across the church he could see his timid little

mother standing beside her stalwart and ungainly brother, eagerly watching his every movement, and patiently waiting for the time when he would come to her. For a moment Malachi Joseph waited and watched Gertrude Bingham as she passed quickly down the aisle. The girl, simply and yet beautifully dressed, her dark eyes animated, her bearing and manner alike betraying the refinement and culture which were hers by training and inheritance, caused even the triumph of the evening to be forgotten for the moment, and Malachi Joseph's face lighted up in the prospect of the walk with her along the beautiful avenue on which her home was situated. He was eager for the interview, for there was something he must say to her, and everything combined to make the occasion most opportune and fitting.

Almost reluctantly he started toward his mother and uncle; and, as he drew near, Malachi Joseph the elder, unable longer to restrain his pent-up enthusiasm, bestowed a resounding thump on the back of his nephew, and in a voice that could be heard even in the vestibule said: "Ye done first-rate, Mal! I was jest tellin' ma that I rather guessed t'night paid for sellin' that ten-acre lot t' raise th' money t' pay for yer schoolin'! I don't begrudge a cent o' it, not a cent!"

The worthy man's face was beaming with an expression of pride and satisfaction, but a flush spread over his nephew's countenance as he glanced uneasily toward the vestibule where he was positive his uncle's noisy declaration could have been heard. Gertrude Bingham was already on her way to join the trio, but there was nothing in her manner to show that she was aware either of the confusion of the younger Malachi Joseph or had heard the words of the elder.

With a manner somewhat constrained the young man introduced his mother and uncle, the simple and cordial response of Gertrude at once appealing to the latter; and his face beamed with delight as she said:

"I am sure you are all to be congratulated. Mr. Pitt made us all proud to-night."

"That's what I was jest sayin'," volunteered the irrepressible Malachi the first. "His ma doesn't say much, but she's jest as proud as I be, an' I don't care if I do say it. Mal's speech was a good one!"

"It was plain that the audience agreed with you," responded Gertrude cordially.

"Course they did!" roared the elder Malachi delightedly.

"Mr. Pitt has made a great many friends in Monroe, and we shall all follow him with the greatest interest.

"Say, Mal," said his uncle slyly, "it's a pity Hannah couldn't 'a' been here. She got yer invite all right, but I couldn't get her t' come along with us. For such a meek critter she's dre'dful set in her ways. I never see a setter."

The face of the young graduate was crimson; but apparently Gertrude was unaware of his confusion or distress, for, addressing herself to the delighted little mother, she ignored the bantering words, and to the unspeakable relief of Malachi Joseph the interview was speedily terminated. He explained to his mother that he would meet her and his uncle at the station on the following morning, and then at once with Miss Bingham he departed from the church.

Under the influence of his companion his constraint soon vanished, and he was listening eagerly to what she was saying.

"I don't see how you dared hold up such an ideal as you did to-night."

"'Dared'?"

"Yes, I know it was all true. I know it's the only thing for a minister, and yet——"

"Oh, but it's true of every work. No man can succeed without giving himself to his work. I don't know why it is that people apply that to ministers only. The scholar has to burn his midnight-oil and give up other things if he is to succeed. The business man has to do the same thing, only in a different way. And if a minister is to succeed, he must not expect to escape the common law."

Malachi Joseph spoke lightly, almost flippantly, in spite of his positive tone. He could not see the expression of perplexity or distress that for an instant rested upon his companion's face, nor even in the clearest light could he have understood that he only in part believed what he had said. Assisted, looked up to, successful hitherto in his career, he would have been the last to believe that in his own heart as yet no emotion, not even his regard for the girl by his side, had ever penetrated much below the surface of his unconscious selfishness.

"I've often wondered what a successful minister was," said Gertrude quietly.

"Why, it's—it's like everything else. Power is the measure of success. The man who can draw the multitudes and hold them by his eloquence is the man——"

"Do you think the prophets were successful?"

"Why, yes. Perhaps not just as we would measure——"

"And yet they were stoned and despised and rejected, weren't they? It doesn't seem to me they were much like 'popular' preachers."

"Oh, but you must see it was different. They were men with a message. And to-day——"

"The successful man must have no message?"

"Not at all," responded Malachi Joseph glibly.

"Do you look upon Paul as a great preacher?"

"The very greatest."

"If I remember aright, he was stoned by his congregation. Didn't they put his feet in the stocks? Didn't they shut him up in prison? Wasn't it really because of his congregation that at last he lost his head?"

"You don't see," began Malachi Joseph quickly.

"No, I don't. I confess I don't. I confess too, that I don't crave that sort of thing for myself. Perhaps I ought to, but I don't. And yet," she added more earnestly, "there isn't a man in the world I admire as I do the one who has convictions."

"If he has the courage of his convictions, you mean," suggested Malachi Joseph.

"No, I don't. I don't mean anything of the

kind. I mean the man who has convictions. He'll have the courage all right if he has *them*. Sometimes I think the trouble with us all is that we have opinions and prejudices, but we *don't* have convictions. Indeed, I believe a conviction, after all, isn't something a man has. It is something that has him. That was why I was interested in listening to you this evening."

"Thank you," responded Malachi Joseph lightly. He had been interested and surprised by what the girl had been saying, and was puzzled to understand just how much and what she had meant. But as for sharing her point of view, that was something foreign to his nature and feelings.

"It will seem strange not to see you in Monroe," suggested Gertrude, abruptly changing the subject.

"Oh, but you may, you will see me," responded Malachi Joseph eagerly, quick to note the change which he had vainly been striving to accomplish.

"Yes, you'll come back to the reunions."

"There will be more than class reunions to draw me."

"A good many things, perhaps."

"Not many, but much."

"By the way, Mr. Pitt," said the girl, perhaps designedly leading the conversation away from its

dangerous course, "you never told me about Hannah. Is she your sister?"

"Why—no—not exactly," stammered Malachi Joseph.

"She isn't—'exactly'?" laughed Gertrude.

"No; she's a friend, a neighbor."

"One of the 'mothers in Israel,' I suppose?"

"No—not exactly."

"Oh, she isn't—'exactly'?" She must be a somewhat elusive person, I should think, from your vivid description." The girl laughed merrily, and the confusion of Malachi Joseph deepened.

"I'll tell you who she is. She is one of the best friends I ever had. She's as good and true a girl as ever you saw. Of course she has never seen much of the world; she never has been outside of Turnerville more than two or three times in her life."

"And she is old now?"

"No, just my age."

"'Exactly' your age, Mr. Pitt?" laughed Gertrude.

"No, not exactly," responded Malachi Joseph, joining in the laugh. "But you would like her. She and I were in the same primary class in the old church, and one of the earliest things I can remem-

ber is the time when she and I used to pipe out together that 'Adam was the first man,' 'Solomon was the wisest man,' 'Moses was the meekest man,' and 'Samson was the strongest man.' She has always been very much interested in my career; in fact, one of the best friends I ever had."

"That was good of her," said Gertrude Bingham demurely.

"Yes, she's a fine girl," responded Malachi Joseph graciously, unaware of the change in the expression of the face of the girl by his side.

"Here we are," said Gertrude as she stopped before the steps that led up to her home. "Will you come in? It may be that some of your classmates are here. Somebody is, anyway, if you can judge from the sounds."

"Thank you," replied Malachi Joseph quickly. The sounds of laughter that came from the open windows were not all that he desired; but the opportunity to say to Gertrude Bingham what was in his mind to say had not as yet been found, and, in the hope that still the word might be spoken, he eagerly accepted the informal invitation, and with her entered the house.

To his surprise he perceived that none of his classmates was there, but instead he beheld Mr.

Burt, the energetic, matter-of-fact chairman of the pulpit committee in Serena. Evidently the man had been somewhat noisily entertaining the household. But as soon as Malachi Joseph entered the room his attentions were at once transferred.

"I was told I'd be likely to find you here," exclaimed Mr. Burt, glancing meaningly at Gertrude as he spoke.

Her momentary confusion was doubly pleasing to Malachi Joseph, and the fact that she was present to hear what was about to be said to him (he had no question as to what Mr. Burt was about to say) was an additional pleasure.

"No, don't leave," said Mr. Burt brusquely as the family rose as if they would leave the two men to themselves. "I don't care who hears what I've got to say to this young man. I think, Mr. Pitt," he added, turning again to Malachi Joseph, "we can settle this matter right here and now as well as anywhere."

Malachi Joseph laughed and glanced at Gertrude, but made no reply.

"We people in Serena know a good thing when we see it," continued Mr. Burt, "and I'm ready to make a straight offer to you. You needn't be afraid to talk, for I rather guess the church folks 'll back

up anything I—and the committee,” he added graciously, “are ready to report. We believe you’re a ‘comer,’ young man; and, if you’ll say the word, I’ll go straight back—my train goes in about fifteen minutes—and report that the thing is done.”

“I had another call to-night,” suggested Malachi Joseph.

“You did? What was it?”

“I am hardly at liberty to explain that.”

“Well, ’tisn’t anything like ours, now, is it?”

“No two fields are ever just alike.”

“Look here, young man, don’t you let anybody fool you! There isn’t such a city for its size in the whole country as Serena. It’s a live, husky, wide-awake town; that’s what it is! And, if you want to work, why, let me tell you, you’ll make a name for yourself there in no time! We hadn’t thought we’d pay quite so much, to start on, as we gave Doctor Black, as long as you weren’t married,” and again the enterprising committeeman glanced at Gertrude Bingham. “Of course,” he added, “if you’re thinking of using the parsonage, why, we’ll give you the use of that too. There isn’t anything small about us. We want the goods, and we’re willing to pay for ’em too! Now I’ve got just eleven minutes to catch my train, and I’d like to take your

answer back with me." Mr. Burt pulled out his watch as he spoke, and again looked at Gertrude.

"What do you think about it, Miss Bingham?" demanded the chairman of the committee.

CHAPTER III

A LETTER AND A STATEMENT

“WHAT do I think?” replied Gertrude Bingham hastily. “Why, I could not think of offering an opinion. It is something in which all Mr. Pitt’s friends are interested, but they couldn’t think of doing anything to influence him—even if they had any influence,” she added. “It’s too serious a matter.”

Mr. Burt laughed as he turned again to Malachi Joseph, and said, “When will you wire me you’ll come?”

“I must have time to think it over.”

“That’s all right, young man; that’s all right. The more you think of it, the better you’ll like it. I know you’ll come, for it isn’t every day in the week a young man gets such a chance as this. Well, think it over and wire me. Just give me your address, and I’ll be going, or I’ll lose my train. Good-by! Good-by to you both.” And in a moment Mr. Burt had gone to catch his train.

When they were left to themselves—for the other

members of the family remained in the library—Malachi Joseph turned eagerly to Gertrude Bingham and said, "You heard what Mr. Burt said?" There was a note of exultation in his voice which he took no pains to conceal.

"Yes, I heard him," replied Gertrude thoughtfully. "What is your other call?"

"Oh, that was to Acton, a little town in the northern part of the State. Doctor Diggs told me about it just before I left the church. It doesn't amount to much, I fancy; but there was no harm in letting Mr. Burt know about it. He was so cock-sure of himself—and of me too," he added lightly.

"Are you really undecided?" The expression of the girl's face was serious, and Malachi Joseph was positive it was born of a deeper source than the mere matter of his present problem.

"You can help me to decide," he said eagerly.

"How can I help you?"

"Why, you can tell me which you would rather have me accept."

"But I'm not the one to decide. It's your problem."

"Oh, I understand that," said Malachi Joseph graciously. "But I may decide as you would like to have me."

There was a new expression in the girl's eyes as she said quietly, "Will my wishes decide this question for you?"

"Didn't I say so?" laughed Malachi Joseph.

For a moment Gertrude Bingham was silent before she said: "Then, if I were you, I would not decide to-night. Wait for a few days, and then see how you are led. To me a 'call' is more than an invitation."

The countenance of Malachi Joseph slightly fell. Somehow it was different from what he had expected. Perhaps he would do well to postpone the word he was eager to say. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said abruptly, as he rose from his chair. "I'll write you within a week and let you know what my decision is. And it may be I'll have another problem then too, which you will have to decide for me."

"For you?"

"For me—and you."

"I think one will be sufficient," Gertrude said quietly. "Don't add to that before it has been solved."

Malachi Joseph smiled as he took his departure. Apparently his confidence in his ability to obtain a satisfactory solution of his problem was undimin-

ished, and his step was light as he sought his room. The evening had been a pronounced success. His graduating oration had won for him the praise which he confidently believed was his by right; the words of the chairman of the pulpit committee from Serena had been like music in his ears; and as a climax the evident interest of Gertrude Bingham in his decision had been the crown of it all. Certainly the "effacement" of Malachi Joseph was not the quality which a chance observer would have pronounced the dominant one, had he seen the young man passing quickly along the street that night on his way to his room in the dormitory. Even the sentiment attached to the "last time" apparently did not impress the young man, for he whistled gaily as he bounded up the stairway.

On the following morning the elation of Malachi Joseph had not departed when, after a hasty farewell to his classmates, he joined his mother and his uncle at the station, and swiftly left behind him the scenes, but not the thoughts, of Monroe.

Three days in Turnerville provided the rest which his anxious mother was positive he required after his many labors and triumphs; and when late on the fourth morning he came down to his breakfast, she bustled about, providing for his wants and sug-

gesting others that had not occurred to him. She was watching him keenly, as Malachi Joseph soon became aware; but the experience was by no means novel, and he accepted her attentions as a natural, perhaps necessary, part of her devotion to him.

"The folks here are all proud o' ye," she ventured at last.

"Are they?"

"Yes, they be. I don't know how many has asked about ye, an' I've done my best t' tell 'em what ye did."

Malachi Joseph smiled, but made no response. The pride of his mother was not new to him, and that it would not suffer her tongue to be silent he had been aware long before his course of study had been completed.

"Say, Mal," she suggested as she hovered about him, "ye haven't been up t' see Hannah yet. Aren't ye goin' t'day?"

"I don't know. Why should I?"

"I think she expects ye."

"Did you tell her I would come?" demanded Malachi Joseph somewhat sternly, a frown appearing on his face as he spoke.

"I told her you was t' home," replied his mother in some confusion. "Ye know," she added hastily,

a slight flush appearing on her cheeks, "ev'rybody in Turnerville is watchin' ye. Ye've always kept comp'ny with Hannah ever since ye was a little boy. And there isn't a better girl in all these parts 'n Hannah Brown!" There was a note of such fierceness as the gentle soul could command in her declaration, as if she was fearful some one would dispute her praise of Hannah.

"I know. Hannah is all right, but as for Turnerville—it strikes me that the people here might do just as well to give some of their surplus time and talk to their own affairs. I never saw a place run down the way this has in the last year or two."

"Turnerville is the prettiest place of its size in the State!" retorted Mrs. Pitt sharply. "That's what the head man in a big store down to New York said only last week when he was here. It's what ev'rybody says."

"Oh, Turnerville is all right," laughed Malachi Joseph. "I didn't mean to cast any reflection on my birthplace."

"But will ye go up to Hannah's?"

"If you want me to."

"That's right, Malachi!" exclaimed his mother delightedly. "I think Hannah will be dreadful pleased."

"She's a good girl, but I trust she hasn't had any foolish notions put into her head."

"Trust her for that. She's the best girl in Turnerville."

"I must write a letter before I go."

Malachi Joseph rose from the breakfast-table, and passed at once to his room. The letter which demanded his attention apparently was difficult to compose, for several times he destroyed what he had written. The difficulty appeared the more strange in view of the fact that when at last, apparently satisfied with his composition, he folded the sheet and directed the envelope, it was plain that the note was not a long one.

TURNERVILLE, June 20.

MY DEAR GERTRUDE: If you will go with me as Mrs. Pitt, I shall accept the call to Serena. There your talents will supplement any that my friends are pleased to believe I may possess, and I am confident your life will be happy. At least, you know that I shall gladly and willingly do all that in me is to make it so. This note is only a brief preface to the volume I will send just as soon as I shall receive your reply, which I am hoping to have by day after to-morrow.

Sincerely yours,

M. J. PITT.

A smile of satisfaction illumined the face of Malachi Joseph when he deposited the letter in the post-office, and then, passing out into the village street, proceeded on his way toward the home of Hannah Brown. He could see the little pink farmhouse on the hillside in the distance, just beyond the confines of the village. His heart softened as he recalled the many good times he had had there with Hannah, the friend of his childhood.

And how good a girl she was! he graciously thought. Fresh, rosy-cheeked, candid, her lack of "culture" certainly was in a measure atoned for by the simplicity and genuineness of her unspoiled nature. Perhaps it was only natural that in her mind the associations of the years had produced a deeper feeling toward him, as his mother had hinted; but, if it was so, he was sincerely sorry, he assured himself. A good friend to her he had always been and always would be; and, when she should be settled, as doubtless she soon would, as the mistress in the home of some prosperous young farmer, they would both laugh heartily as they would recall and recount the experiences of their own callow days. Their lives would be lived amid different surroundings; that was but natural; and Malachi Joseph thought complacently of the parsonage in Serena.

Even when he turned in at the gate, and started up the flower-bordered pathway that led to Hannah's house his complacency was still oozing from his very pores, and it had not once occurred to him that in all the twenty-four years of his life there had not been a feeling for any one or for anything (unless it was perhaps for Malachi Joseph Pitt) that had penetrated much below the surface of his life.

The greeting he received from Hannah and her mother was cordial, and they at once bade him come to the kitchen where they were making preserves. Hannah, with her sleeves rolled back over her shapely arms, her face lightened up by the genuine pleasure of greeting her childhood friend, her brown eyes, her friendly and frank ways, certainly combined to produce a feeling in Malachi Joseph's heart that caused him to forget for the moment even the letter which he had left at the office on his way.

With the freedom born of his long familiarity in the household he accepted the invitation to help himself to doughnuts; and, selecting one of the tempting proofs of Hannah's skill, he seated himself in a chair in the doorway.

On the stone step was seated Hiram Turnbull. "Hi" his neighbors, economical of time and ef-

fort, called him; and the owner of the name had never thought of protesting, despite his dignity born of the half-century mark which soon would be the measure of his years. Ignorant of the purposes and presence of collar or necktie, likewise of a coat on a summer day, his head crowned by a huge twenty-cent straw hat, which was seldom removed except when he retired for the night; possessor of three farms and a certain keen intelligence, which neither his garb nor bewhiskered face could conceal, he was one of the characters of Turnerville whom Malachi Joseph had known from his earliest childhood. Indeed, Hi's son Daniel had been his playmate years before; but the city had beckoned to Dan, as it had to many another country boy, and like them he had responded; and so he had faded from the vision of Malachi Joseph.

Without rising from his seat on the stone doorstep or ceasing to chew the ever-present wisp of straw between his teeth, Hi greeted Malachi Joseph noisily, if not with any manifestation of cordiality.

"I hear ye've got yer diplommy, Mal," he suggested.

"Yes, sir, graduated—at last," laughed Malachi Joseph.

"Goin' t' be a preacher, I hear."

"Going to try to be."

"Mebbe Hannah 'll give ye a job pretty quick, seein' as how she's 'bout made up her mind t' marry my boy Dan."

"What?"

Malachi Joseph turned sharply to Hannah to find confirmation or denial of the startling statement. His own face had lost a part of its color, and there was somehow a strange sinking in his heart.

CHAPTER IV

TWO RESPONSES

“**I**S that true, Hannah?” he inquired, his voice trembling in spite of his efforts to control it.

The color in the cheeks of the girl deepened and, as she turned her face away for the moment, Hi quickly broken in: “Course it’s true, Mal! Don’t ye approve? I reckoned ye would, seein’ as how both Hannah an’ Dan has been good friends to ye.”

“Certainly. I extend my congratulations.” Malachi Joseph’s manner was still constrained, though he endeavored to appear cordial. He was startled and in a measure hurt by the information. What had she ever seen in the freckle-faced, barefooted little urchin, as he recalled Dan Turnbull? Somehow it seemed to him that there was something wrong in the thought, a wrong to himself as well as to Hannah, whose fresh and wholesome nature had impressed him that morning as it seldom had done. Her silence was perhaps due in part to confusion, he thought; but it was confirmatory of the words of her future father-in-law, and not for a

moment did he think of calling Hi's statement in question.

"Got a call yet, Mal?" inquired the man, apparently oblivious of the constraint that had fallen upon the little group.

"Yes, I have two."

"I'm sorry for ye."

"I don't know that I need any sympathy," responded Malachi Joseph somewhat sharply, for Hi's manner was strangely irritating that morning.

"No, I don't s'pose ye do. An' yet I know how hard 'twas for ye, even when ye wasn't more'n knee-high to a grasshopper, to make up yer mind. I had a hoss last year same way. There was two mangers in his stall; an' when I put hay down both on 'em, an' while he was tryin' to make up his mind which he'd begin at, th' other hosses had eat up all th' was. Poor hoss most starved t' death. Had t' take him out an' put him in a stall all by himself."

Hi's manner, despite its apparent heartiness, was extremely annoying; and Malachi Joseph was convinced too, that there was an element of malice in it, perhaps designed. By an effort he restrained his anger, and said, "You are a shrewd manager, Hi."

"Yes, I've always believed in hewin' t' th' line. If ye've got anything t' say, why, say it an' be done

with it; that's my motto. I'm afraid I'd never made much o' a preacher; they've always got t' be sayin' nice things."

"You don't even go to church, Hi, to say nothing of going into the pulpit," retorted Mrs. Brown somewhat sharply.

"That's right, I don't, I 'xpect," laughed Hi. "Went enough when I was a boy t' last me a life-time, though I can't say as how I went then just because I wanted to. My wife goes now, though, enough for both o' us."

"Why don't you go, Hi?" she demanded.

"Well, I don't b'lieve more'n about half o' th' stuff the preachers try to ram down my throat, and I don't b'lieve they do themselves. Mebbe you can straighten me out, Mal?" he added, turning to Malachi Joseph as he spoke.

"I don't know that I can. Perhaps when you're in a different state of mind I might discuss your doubts," replied Malachi Joseph dryly, at the same time recalling the admonition concerning casting pearls before swine.

"Oh, my 'state's' all right. 'Tisn't my state what troubles me half so much 's the preachers'."

"I don't know what you mean," said Malachi Joseph.

"Oh, I've seen preachers in my day, even if I hain't very much on goin' t' church. Did ye ever see one what didn't pick out the rockin'-chair an' keep it if th' was one in the room, no matter how th' other folks might be standin' round? Did ye ever see one what didn't feel a call t' th' biggest salary? Not much ye didn't! My wife's great on preachers, but I guess she's got religion 'nough for th' whole family. She sends round t' our preacher here some pies 'n' cream ev'ry week reg'lar. I don't begrudge it, but I guess she 'bout does my share too."

"Poison cream?" demanded Mrs. Brown.

"I didn't say nothin' 'bout poison cream," laughed Hi boisterously. "I said 'pies 'n' cream.' He's a good man, though, I'll say that for him."

Malachi Joseph, unable longer to endure the blasts of Hi, and convinced that the man did not intend to depart so long as he himself should remain, arose, and, striving to appear unconcerned, bade his friends good morning and at once departed. Nor was he unaware, though he did not once glance behind him, that the shrewd glance of Hi followed him until he had passed out into the road and could no longer be seen.

Instead of taking the way that led directly to his

mother's house, however, he chose a circuitous path that led him through a long stretch of woodland that belonged to Hiram Turnbull himself. Malachi Joseph's thoughts were not of the owner, however, nor even of Hannah Brown, for whom his sympathy had been aroused by the words of his mother that very morning. His feeling of sympathy now was for himself, although he could not explain why it should be so. Somehow there was a feeling in his mind that he had been treated unjustly. That Hannah could have forgotten or ignored him seemed impossible. Indeed, he had even formulated in his mind the very sentences he would use when he should tell her about his own future. There was a feeling of resentment against her and the barefooted Dan of his boyhood days, and even of anger against the loquacious Hi, who had, as he convinced himself, spoken with a certain maliciousness when he informed him of the approaching marriage, and gave vent to his opinion of preachers in general and of Malachi Joseph in particular.

When he arrived at his home, he did not respond to the unspoken question which he could see in his mother's eyes, and at once sought his room. By a severe effort he brought himself to look more calmly at his own future, and to an extent suc-

ceeded in banishing all thoughts of Turnerville and its inhabitants, including even Hannah and Hi Turnbull.

The feeling of resentment, however, did not entirely disappear, and served to increase the impatience with which he waited for the slow days to pass. In his heart there was an intense desire for the time to come when he would be free to announce his own plans for the future and thereby convince the people of Turnerville that he was not any longer to be a subject for their wagging tongues.

On the third day after the despatch of his letter to Gertrude Bingham he had haunted the village post-office at the arrival of the mails, and his disappointment was keen when on each occasion his box remained empty. On the morning of the fourth day he purposely delayed his visit to the office until he was convinced the mail had been distributed; and, when at last he entered the little room, and discovered two letters in his box, his heart was beating wildly. His excitement increased when in response to his call at the window the two letters were handed to him, and at a glance he perceived that the postmark of one was Monroe and of the other Serena. As he passed out to the porch,

he came face to face with Hi Turnbull, and he returned that worthy individual's greeting so effusively that the straw dropped from its accustomed position between Hi's lips, and an exclamation that sounded very like "Swan!" took its place. The shrewd owner of three farms even stopped and stared at Malachi Joseph, who was already out on the village street and was walking swiftly in the direction of the home of Hannah Brown.

Unaware of the effect of his greeting, not even conscious that he was walking in a direction that had aroused the ire or suspicions of Hi, Malachi Joseph, the two letters tightly grasped in his hand, was striding forward, intent only upon gaining some quiet spot, where, unobserved and unmolested, he would be free to read the words that would mean so much to him. At last he halted beneath the shade of a huge maple, and for a moment he hesitated as to which letter he would read first. The uncertainty speedily vanished; and, hastily tearing open the envelope which contained Gertrude Bingham's letter, with staring eyes he began to read.

MONROE, June 24.

MY DEAR MR. PITT: Your letter was a source of great surprise and sorrow. I had never once thought you entertained any such feeling for me as you imply; and believe

me, my friend, the knowledge has brought with it a sense of pain. If in any way I have unconsciously led you to think our pleasant relations had any other basis than the sincere friendship I have felt for you, you must forgive me. The honor you have done me I fully appreciate, but the suggestion in your letter is impossible.

If there was no other obstacle, the knowledge that you had selected the church at Serena even in part on my account, as you seem to imply in your letter, would be sufficient of itself. I should always feel that you had, in your unselfishness, effaced yourself for me. *That* I could not bear.

There is another reason, also, which I shall give you, because you are, and I hope will continue to be, one of my best friends. To-night my engagement to Henry Dean is to be announced. I am as certain that I shall have your best wishes as I am positive that you have, and always will have, mine.

With sincere regards,

GERTRUDE BINGHAM.

The letter in the hands of Malachi Joseph trembled like the leaves on the branches above his head. The street before him seemed to be rising and falling like the waves of the sea. A feeling of blind, helpless rage possessed him; and he tore the letter into shreds, and threw them far from him. His anger at the girl for the moment overpowered

any other feeling he had cherished. She had been false! She had led him on! Purposely she had humiliated him! Every one, including even Mr. Burt, who had been made aware of the implied relation between them, had understood. And now——

For a moment the ashen-colored face of Malachi Joseph was almost like that of a man who had lost his reason—his all. Suddenly he became aware of the second letter, which had remained unopened in his hand. The thought of Mr. Burt had recalled it to his mind, and the postmark indicated that it was from the committeeman. Hastily, his hands trembling like those of a man suffering from the weakness of old age, he tore open the envelope, and began to read the letter which he drew forth.

SERENA, 6, 24.

M. J. PITT, Esq.

Dear Sir: The matter concerning which I recently had an interview with you in Monroe is called off. Last Sunday (in my absence) a man occupied our pulpit who swept the boards. The people could not be stopped, and last night he was given a formal call. As you informed me that you had received another call, and were somewhat undecided as to which to consider, this action of ours, I trust, will make no difference in your own plans.

Yours truly,

D. P. BURT.

The very curtness of the letter added to its cruelty. Indifferently, as if it had been a mere matter of business, Mr. Burt had dismissed the matter. In his blind rage Malachi Joseph recalled the matter-of-fact ("unspiritual" he had termed it) manner of the man, which from the first he had resented. Once more the street seemed to surge before the eyes of Malachi Joseph. Imprecations rose to his lips, and all the fierceness and bitterness of his wrath returned. There was a conspiracy against him. The forces of evil were allied for his overthrow. His breath came in sobs, and his eyes were staring like the eyes of the blind. He plunged madly forward, unaware of the direction in which he was going, unmindful of his surroundings, a feeling possessing him that reminded him of his boyhood days when he had plowed his way through the great drifts of winter snows that for days blocked the roads about Turnerville. He was like one dragging a heavy load, like a man struggling without foothold in the midst of wild and tumbling waves.

Suddenly he became indistinctly aware that some one was calling to him, for he had heard his name pronounced by a voice that sounded somewhat familiar in his ears. Stupidly he stopped, and, looking

up, beheld Hannah standing near the gate in front of her home.

He had not even been aware that he was near the familiar place, and he gazed at her as if he did not fully realize where he was or recognize the girl before him.

“Good morning, Mal,” Hannah was saying in her cheeriest tones. “Won’t you come in? Why, Malachi Joseph!” she added in sudden alarm as for the first time she perceived the expression of his face. “Are you ill? You look like a crazy man! What’s the trouble? What’s wrong?”

The sincerity of her alarm was evident in her manner and the tones of her voice, and her sympathy instantly appealed to him. He stepped forward, and leaned upon the fence, looking into her face. It was good to feel that some one still cared.

CHAPTER V

A SURPRISING DECISION

“YES, I’m ill,” groaned Malachi Joseph.
“Come right into the house! We’ll send for the doctor. We’ll take you home.”

“No, it isn’t that kind.”

Malachi Joseph looked eagerly at the girl, who was trembling in her excitement. All the freshness of her wholesome nature, the sincerity of her sympathy, appealed to him afresh. A wave of momentary despair swept over him. What a mistake he had made! The feeling of bitterness and mortification that had possessed him served to deepen the consciousness of a double loss.

“Hannah,” he said, “when do you and Dan—when do you expect to leave Turnerville?”

For a moment the girl stared blankly at him, and her face flushed crimson.

“I don’t know, Mal,” she replied quietly.

“Everybody in Turnerville has always thought that we——” he began, and then stopped abruptly. There were wild thoughts in his mind, born of his

wounded pride and the presence of this girl whose face could not conceal her sympathy and interest. There was a way out of his difficulties, and one by which he could show those who had caused him so much suffering that he was not utterly cast down. For the moment the impulse was so strong that he struggled in his efforts to master it. Then the words of Hi Turnbull came back to him, and the pride with which he had announced the new relation of Hannah and Dan. With a sigh that caused a new expression to appear in Hannah's face he crushed down the temptation, assuring himself that, whatever had befallen, he had not stooped to such a measure as that. And yet his wounded vanity cried out for help. So long had he been accustomed to the praise and appreciation of others that he had come to depend upon them. It was like the breath of his life.

With an effort he began again to speak. "Everybody in Turnerville has always thought that—we were good friends," he managed to say.

"And you've thought so yourself, haven't you, Mal?" inquired Hannah with a smile.

"Yes, but they have thought there was more to it." The words would come in spite of his efforts to suppress them.

"And you haven't?" Hannah laughed lightly as she spoke, but there was in her eyes, that were looking straight into his own, an expression of mingled dignity and strength which Malachi Joseph had never before seen there. It startled as well as surprised him.

"I'm feeling better; at least, I'm not feeling so bad," he said. "I think I'll go on home now."

"You'll be here all summer, Mal?"

"I don't think so."

"You must come and see us often while you are here. We shall not forget the old days, even if you do. I know," she added pleasantly, "we can't expect to follow you in your career, which every one says will be a brilliant one, Mal; but we shall always be interested." She held forth her hand as she spoke, and Malachi Joseph grasped it in silence for a moment, and then without a word started back to the village. Nor did he stop until he had entered the telegraph-office in the little station and despatched the following message to Doctor Diggs:

"I will go to Acton."

He then abruptly departed for his home, and, announcing his decision to his startled little mother, proceeded directly to his own room. There the battle was all fought over again. Just how much of



"Then without a word [he]
started back to the village."

his suffering was due to chagrin and wounded vanity he did not comprehend; perhaps he did not know. That he had acted impulsively he was aware, but there was a certain element of exhilaration in the thought that he had committed himself beyond recall. The decision was made, and there was to be no retreat. The motive that had led him to make the decision he knew was not of the highest. Indeed, the thought uppermost in his mind was of his longing to be "anywhere, anywhere out of the world."

In the days that followed, he kept himself for the most of the time at home. The surprise of his friends affected him but little. Even the words of Hi Turnbull, who stopped him one morning in the post-office, and, after his question as to the truthfulness of the report that Malachi Joseph had accepted a call to Acton had been answered, said, as the wisp of straw between his teeth bobbed vigorously up and down, that he didn't know but he'd have to change his opinion about preachers, after all, aroused neither amusement nor anger.

The disappointment of his uncle Mal was keen, and his regret was vocal; but Malachi Joseph volunteered no explanation, and listened in silence. His mother approved; but even her approval had no

marked influence, for Malachi Joseph well knew that her attitude would have been the same, whatever his decision had been. Even the surprise of his classmates, several of whom wrote him as soon as it was reported that Pitt was going to take a mission church, did not affect him strongly.

The sole message that stirred his heart was in the letter which he received from Doctor Diggs. After commending the decision, and frankly expressing both his surprise and pleasure, he wrote:

I don't know, Pitt, what has brought you to it. It may have been that you effaced yourself, or it may be that others have done it for you. It matters little. You are at a place now where you will soon learn what the Christian minister is in the world for. You have ability, and will soon add faith to your knowledge. You are well rid of a load that was too heavy for you to carry. In your new field you will soon find some poor soul who is groping in the darkness, trying to find out why he is here, and hungering for something that will afford him relief and release. Don't forget that you have something for that man, and that you came to Acton just on purpose to give it to him. He may not need texts nor tracts nor talk, nor even sermons; but his need is great, and be sure you have that which he needs. Then give it to him. The only thing in the wide world which is multiplied by dividing and added to by subtracting is the Christian's religion. I hope

you will become a good preacher, but I hope and pray even more earnestly that you may become a good *minister* of Jesus Christ.

Malachi Joseph's feelings as he read the letter were somewhat confused, but the prevailing one was of a new tenderness toward the brusque professor. The vision of the man with his shaggy eyebrows, straight, upright, iron-gray hair, the strong and rugged features, and the expression of tenderness that on the slightest provocation appeared in the eyes or in the corners of the mouth, arose before him; and the words, "a good minister of Jesus Christ," recurred with a force and suggestiveness they never had had for him before. For the first time in his life the "call" of the preacher was dimly felt, and the very prospect of the difficulties to be faced in his new field appealed to him.

Three weeks later Malachi Joseph Pitt departed from Turnerville. He had shaken hands in parting from Hannah Brown in the church at the close of the service on the preceding day, which was Sunday; but he had not gone to her home after the interview, tragic in his mind, that had followed his reading of the letters from Gertrude Bingham and Mr. Burt. Nor had he sent a reply to either of the letters referred to. The first effects of his suffering

were gone, and there was even a feeling of mild elation in his thoughts when at last he had bidden his tearful little mother good-by, shaken hands with his uncle Mal, whose disapproval was still vocal and gave promise of being "continued in our next," had seen that his trunk was properly checked; and then the vision of the little village had faded away in the distance as the rumbling train sped toward the next station.

It was near nightfall when Malachi Joseph alighted from the train and stood upon the platform of the station at Smithville, whence he was to be taken by stage to Acton, three miles away. Only the station-master was to be seen as the cars resumed their noisy journey, not another passenger having alighted from the train; and men and stages were all invisible about the place, which did not comprise more than a score of houses, all alike weather-beaten and dilapidated.

"Will you please tell me where I can find the stage for Acton?" inquired Malachi Joseph as he approached the station-master.

"I dunno. Most likely over there under the hotel sheds," replied the man gruffly, jerking his thumb toward some sheds that adjoined a low rambling dwelling directly across the road.

“ I was informed that it met the trains here.”

“ Huh? ”

“ They wrote me from Acton that I would find the stage here.”

“ Well, I guess ye’ll have t’ look for it if ye find it. Tom Sanders drives it; that is, when he has anything t’ drive. Ye’ll be most likely t’ find him over t’ th’ hotel—in the bar-room.”

“ Thank you.”

Malachi Joseph did not wait to see that the man stared at him until he had crossed the street, and was likewise ignorant of the grunt of curiosity or surprise with which he watched him disappear within the house. The young minister found himself in the bar-room, where three men were seated with their chairs tilted against the wall, all three working vigorously upon corn-cob pipes, but manifesting no other signs of vitality as he entered.

“ I am looking for Mr. Sanders,” suggested Malachi Joseph. “ The driver of the stage to Acton,” he added, deeming a more personal description desirable.

Two of the men stared moodily at him, but did not speak. The third, however, removed his pipe from his lips and said:

“ Tom Sanders? ”

"Yes."

"That's him." The man pointed with his pipe at the one of the trio seated nearest the bar.

Turning to the man thus indicated, Malachi Joseph inquired, "Do you drive the stage to Acton?"

"I drive the hosses," responded the man glumly. His wit, however, failed to elicit even a trace of a smile from the faces of his companions.

"When do you start?"

"Goin' there?"

"Yes."

"Got any baggage?"

"Yes. Here's the check." Malachi Joseph handed the check to the driver.

Tom Sanders received the bit of brass, slowly inspected it, and then, rising from his seat, said: "I'll hitch up. You stay here till I come back."

Malachi Joseph, however, departed from the room with the driver, and, taking a position in front of the hotel, explained to the man that he would wait for him there. He watched the driver as he moved slowly toward the sheds, and then turned to look about him.

The sun had disappeared from sight, and in the dusk the air of general dilapidation was intensified.

The station across the road had never received a coat of paint, and its appearance somehow reminded him of a weather-beaten and wrinkled old man. Near-by were two or three irregular piles of lumber and a small pen, where, he concluded, cattle were kept before they were shipped. The roads were uncared for, and the impression from everything he saw was that of decay; but it must have settled over the place years ago—centuries, perhaps, so old and wrinkled did even the neglected fences appear.

The sight was depressing, and the hills that bordered the town seemed to stand like barriers between Smithville and all contact with the life of the world beyond. For a moment a feeling of intense loneliness swept over the heart of Malachi Joseph, and he felt like one who had been forsaken and left alone.

His meditations were interrupted by the approach of the stage, whose appearance was in thorough keeping with its surroundings. It was a simple "two-seated wagon," thickly coated with mud, that had perhaps never been removed, and drawn by two downcast, bony beasts, which in the vernacular of the driver were known as "hosses."

As he assisted the driver in lifting his trunk to its place, Malachi Joseph noticed the appearance of

the man carefully. Evidently not much more than twenty years of age, with thick neck and low brow, with small eyes that seemed to be furtive and alert even in the dim light, with a chest and arms that betokened unusual physical strength, and a countenance that was sullen and might at times be savage in its appearance, the driver certainly was a man in whom the brutal instincts were not difficult to arouse. Malachi Joseph climbed into the seat the man indicated was to be his, and with never a thought that Tom Sanders was to provide an experience so tragical that the effects of it were to remain with him throughout his life began the last part of his journey.

CHAPTER VI

THE ARRIVAL

IT was a lonely ride. The road, sandy in places, and the frequent deep ruts or large stones that had not been removed caused the wagon to jolt so heavily that it was with difficulty that Malachi Joseph retained his seat. An occasional unpainted house was passed, and the appearance of the country was that of one which had long ago given up hope and abandoned all thoughts of improvement. The land certainly was not fertile, and the impression it made was that, when the forests had been felled years before and the lumber had been shipped to the distant cities, the chief means of livelihood had departed with it.

The appearance of the driver and of the men whom Malachi Joseph had seen in Smithville was certainly in keeping with their surroundings, and if Smithville, with its railway facilities and providing the center for the shipping-trade, such as it was, was so woe-begone in its exterior, what must Acton be, located three miles away? The thought was not

stimulating ; but for some reason, which Malachi Joseph was unable to explain, he as yet was not cast down, and was even eagerly thinking of the possibilities of labor his new field would afford.

He glanced again at the silent and morose driver in the seat in front of him. Not once had the man spoken since their departure from Smithville, save to his horses ; and Malachi Joseph suddenly decided to attempt to draw him into conversation.

"How large a place is Acton?" he inquired pleasantly.

"I dunno."

"I was told there were about three hundred people in the village." The information was not disputed, for the driver made no response. "How many churches are there in Acton?" he inquired.

"Three, I guess."

"'Three'! Why, that doesn't leave more than a hundred, including the men, women, and children, for each! Have they all pastors?"

"I dunno."

"Perhaps you don't go to church very often?" Whatever the facts in the case may have been, the driver volunteered no information as to his own personal preferences or habits. "I'm the new minister," he added.

The information was of sufficient interest to cause the head of Tom Sanders slowly to turn on the thick neck on which it rested, and for a moment he gazed at his passenger.

"Be ye?" he inquired at last, but there was neither interest nor curiosity in his bearing or words.

"Yes," responded Malachi Joseph cordially. "I hope you will come out and help me. I want the young men to stand by me."

It was too dark to enable Malachi Joseph to perceive the traces of a partly suppressed grin that for a moment appeared in the corners of Tom Sanders' mouth, and perhaps it was as well for his peace of mind that it was so.

"Do you know where Mrs. Horne lives?"

"Th' widder Horne?" The reply of the driver was so unexpectedly quick that for a moment Malachi Joseph was startled.

"Yes, I think she is a widow."

"I know where she lives."

"You may leave me at her house, then."

"What for?"

"Oh, that's where I am to board—at least for a time."

Malachi Joseph could feel that the driver was

staring at him, and, although Tom did not speak, he was nevertheless aware that the man was somehow not pleased by the announcement. "Why, isn't it a good place?" he inquired mildly.

"Place is all right. Church folks tell ye t' board there?"

"I believe so. I did not know of the arrangement till they wrote me."

"Humph!" grunted the driver, and at once lapsed into his former silence.

They were approaching the borders of Acton by this time, and the interest and attention of Malachi Joseph were absorbed in observing the place which was to be the scene of his labors. The houses were straggling, and for the greater part not unlike those he had seen in Smithville. There were more places, however, that bore the impress of good taste and a measure of prosperity that at some time had been enjoyed. It was evident that the prosperity had belonged to a former generation, for there were no new houses to be seen. There were several streets, and all converged in a little center or square like the spokes of a wheel. An ancient hotel with a swinging signboard in front that proclaimed to all passers-by that here was to be found the Acton Arms, a couple of stores of general merchandise,

a combined blacksmith and wagon shop, and a post-office comprised the places of business activity in the village. The stage passed up the street, turned into another of the converging roads without halting, and, as it passed a small church edifice, Tom Sanders volunteered the information, "There's yer church."

Malachi Joseph gazed almost in excitement at the rude little building. It was small, not capable of containing more than a hundred and fifty people, but what impressed him most was the general air of neglect that seemed to pervade the structure. He could see that the paint had mostly faded or peeled from the sides, the shutters were gone from the front of the little square tower, the grass was high in the yard, the "horse-block" had fallen until the end toward the street sagged heavily, and the row of sheds on one side of the lot was sadly out of repair, the roof of those that were nearest him having partly fallen, doubtless under the weight of the mass of snow and ice that had rested upon it for no one knew how many of the long and bitter winters for which Acton was famous.

The sight was not inspiring, and yet somehow Malachi Joseph failed to be cast down, perhaps because he had arrived at a state of mind in which

disappointment no longer had any terrors. There was even a feeling of elation, strange and new, in his heart; but before the church had been left far behind the driver halted before a low, white house. Malachi Joseph could see even in the dim light that the place was carefully kept; there were green blinds on the white sides; rows and beds of flowers were on either side of the boardwalk that led to the door; mountain-ash trees, with great clusters of their red berries hanging from the branches, were in the front yard; and the light that was shining from the windows of the lower rooms somehow seemed to have a kindly welcome for him. The contrast between the homelike place and the forlorn aspect of the church was doubly welcome, and his heart thrilled as he thought here was to be his home.

Near the front gate were two young people talking, a girl and a man, both somewhat younger than he; and, as the stage drew near, they both stopped, and looked with unconcealed interest at Malachi Joseph as he stepped down upon the street.

There was a momentary hesitation, and then the girl moved quickly forward. "Good evening, Tom," she said to the driver, and then, turning to the stranger, said pleasantly, "Are you Mr. Pitt?"

"I am," replied Malachi Joseph as he lifted his hat.

"My mother is expecting you. I am Esther Horne, and I am glad to welcome you to Acton." As she spoke, the girl extended her hand, which Malachi Joseph grasped, and acknowledged her courtesy. He could see that she was a type with which he had been familiar at Turnerville. Somewhat self-conscious, fond of display, as her dress at once disclosed, and yet good-hearted, not lacking in intelligence, unaccustomed to any life outside of Acton, she was doubtless one of the leaders among the younger element in the village life, he quickly concluded.

"This is Mr. Howe," volunteered Esther as her companion advanced.

"Pleased to meet you," said "Sam" Howe as he greeted the new-comer.

Malachi Joseph returned the greeting, and glanced interestedly at the young man, whom at once he took to be a farmer. His face was round and lighted up by an expression of good nature; and, as he took Malachi Joseph's hand, the latter had no question as to the strength of the muscles in Sam's arms.

"Hello, Tom," said the young man to the driver.

"Hello, Sam," responded the driver gruffly, without pausing in his task of placing the trunk on the street.

As soon as this was done, Malachi Joseph stepped forward and paid his fare, and then at once advanced with Esther toward the door, where he could see that a woman was standing, doubtless the "widow Horne," with whom his home was to be.

"Here, Tom, I'll give you a lift with the trunk," called Sam.

The driver, however, without replying, at once resumed his seat, grasped the reins, and started back down the street.

Sam gazed at him a moment in surprise, and then without a word stooped and lifted the trunk to his shoulder, and turned toward the house.

"Where'll you have this, Esther?" he called as he approached.

"Here, let me help you!" exclaimed Malachi Joseph quickly, as he perceived the burden which the young man was carrying. "I thought the driver——"

"Tom is such a silly," said Esther, speaking to Sam, although Malachi Joseph could plainly hear her words. "He won't stay a minute if any one else is around."

"Let him go! I don't need his help, and as far as I'm concerned, I like his room better'n his company." Then, laughingly responding to Malachi Joseph's proffer of aid, he said: "That's all right. I've got it right where I want it. Don't you worry 'bout it."

With a swing Sam started quickly up the stairway to deposit his burden in the room where Esther had preceded him, leaving Malachi Joseph to respond to the welcome with which her mother had met the new minister.

Soft-voiced, sweet-faced woman that she was, Malachi Joseph had no difficulty in reading the story of her life without a word of explanation on her part, for every country village possessed at least a few of just such women. That the widow Horne was a "good manager" he could readily understand, for the room and her own appearance alike proclaimed the fact. Doubtless she was one of those who had been left a widow with her house paid for, and perhaps a little money in the bank. And then the pinching struggle for an existence had begun. Everything was carefully looked to, and every detail of management doubtless received her scrupulous care. Devoted to her church, loved and respected by her neighbors, the "one ewe lamb" in her house-

hold was nevertheless the supreme object of her care, the pride and delight of her life.

Without a thought that his own life had been in anywise similar, Malachi Joseph smiled as he pictured to himself the stories of Esther to which he would be compelled to listen, and the tokens of the mother's love and pride with which doubtless he was destined to become familiar.

There was no disposition, however, to make light of these things when in response to Esther's call he at once proceeded to his own room. The atmosphere of the home, he was positive, would be all that he desired, and his own comfort would be a subject of such frequent conversation that he was likely to be made uncomfortable. The mother and her daughter were both simple-hearted and innocent.

In his own room Malachi Joseph looked about him with renewed interest. On the floor was an ingrain carpet of large and ancient pattern; the walls were adorned with a few pictures, one of which was a supposed representation of the scene in the house at Bethany, wherein the attitude of each figure was startlingly impossible; a worked motto by which the reader was bidden to be mindful that "faith giveth the victory"—doubtless a specimen

of Esther's handiwork, and placed on the walls of the room that was to be his in deference to his position; a few chairs; a table covered by an antique spread; a high, four-posted bedstead whereon a bed, evidently of feathers, reposed in a manner that almost started the perspiration on his brow at the sight; and a small stove in which wood was to be burned, completed the major part of the outfittings. It was all comfortable, and, best of all, was to be his in a manner such as he never had possessed anything before. When Malachi Joseph descended to the room below, where he was informed that supper was ready, his heart was glowing. It was all strange; yet the pleasure was undeniable.

CHAPTER VII

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

AT the supper-table Malachi Joseph speedily was aware that his presence was a source of some commotion in the simple household, but the desire to please him was so manifest that even the frequent and nervous giggles of Esther and the urgency with which her mother repeated her requests that he should "have some more of the strawberry jam" failed to dim the welcome which it was evident it was in their hearts to give the new minister.

Somewhat to the surprise of Malachi Joseph, Sam Howe was also a guest at the table, and the air of proprietorship which he unconsciously assumed aroused a suspicion that the young man's relation to Esther was one that gave promise of being more than belonged to a chance friendship. The manifest physical strength of Sam, and his round face, which beamed with good nature, were impressive, and at once awakened a feeling of interest and sympathy in Malachi Joseph's heart, which not even

the hair upon Sam's forehead, redolent of oil and plainly held in place only as a result of painstaking and elaborate care, could dispel. Sam's garb too, was in keeping with his odorous and plastered locks. A wide and brilliant-hued tie held a high and shining collar in its proper place; a brilliant stone glittered upon his striped shirt-front; two huge rings adorned the fingers of his left hand; and his clothing was not ill-fitting, although it was of a pattern that for a moment caused Malachi Joseph to fear that his own eyes were becoming tangled, so twisted and tortuous were the markings. A glimpse at Sam's honest face and a perception of the genuine pleasure of the young man in the presence of Esther were sufficient to dispel the impressions of the outward man, and Malachi Joseph's heart warmed toward the visitor in the household.

Esther herself was what was known in Acton as "a pretty girl." Her features, somewhat small, were regular and pleasing, and that her heart was good the expression of her blue eyes warranted, although to Malachi Joseph their resemblance to those of a large wax doll was somehow suggestive. That she was somewhat vain the dress she wore indicated, for it was frilled and trimmed and adorned with ribbons until only occasional glimpses of its

original material were to be had. There were ribbons too, upon her wrists and about her neck and upon her hair, so that when she laughed, as she did most of the time, her appearance suggested that of a gaudy streamer. There was no disguising her good humor, however, and Malachi Joseph at once perceived that she was a simple-hearted, unsophisticated little maid, fond of dress and "attention," somewhat vain, and evidently the supreme object in the life of her faded little mother, who perhaps years before had been much such a girl herself. Suffering and the strain of life had produced in the mother's face, however, an element which as yet was lacking in her daughter, though it occurred to Malachi Joseph that the years might have in store for Esther some such lessons as her mother had learned in the larger school of life.

The thought of Hannah came back to him with redoubled power as he contrasted her quiet dignity with the lightness of this simple-hearted girl. Somehow—and the young preacher was unable to account for the change even to himself—it was the thought of Hannah which had remained with him. The life in Monroe was like the memory of a dream, and even the recollection of Gertrude Bingham had ceased to be a source of trouble. A cloud

passed for a moment over his face as he recalled his last interview with Hannah, but it was dispelled by the pleading voice of Mrs. Horne.

“Won’t you have some more of the strawberry jam, Mr. Pitt? You aren’t eating enough to keep a chicken alive. You know Esther made this jam.”

Malachi Joseph graciously permitted himself to be served once more, and said, “I think Miss Esther must be an excellent cook.”

“Best in Acton!” volunteered Sam quickly.

“Hush, Sam!” giggled Esther.

“But she is!” persisted her admirer. “She can do most anything. Makes her own dresses; and, when you hear her play the organ in church, you’ll say——”

“Wait and see what he says,” interrupted Esther, again laughing.

“You haven’t met many of our folks, have you?” inquired Mrs. Horne.

“No, none except what I see here—and the young man who brought me over in the stage,” replied Malachi Joseph.

“That’s Tom Sanders,” suggested Sam.

“He’s a fool, Tom is!” said Esther tartly.

“Why?” laughed Sam. “Because he likes to be where you are?”

"You know why!" retorted Esther, her face coloring deeply as she spoke. Her reply seemed greatly to delight the young man by her side, and he laughed loudly. Malachi Joseph's face, however, as he glanced keenly at the young people, took on an expression of momentary trouble. He recalled the surly, almost sullen, manner of his driver, and the recollection of what had occurred when the stage had stopped before the widow Horne's abode took on a new meaning in the light of what had just been said. He had no thought, however, that the deepest tragedy of his life was to be linked to the sullen young driver of the stage from Smithville and to the two thoughtless young people seated opposite to him at the simple table of Mrs. Horne.

"I'm sure Esther is not to blame if Tom tries to be attentive to her," said Mrs. Horne quickly. "She has never encouraged him any."

"I'm not blaming him," roared Sam delightedly. "I'm not blaming anybody for thinking Esther is all right. I'd blame 'em if they didn't!"

"Be still, Sam," giggled Esther, who plainly was not displeased at what was being said.

"I am still Sam. I shall always be Sam. It's you that I don't want to be still Esther Horne. Esther Howe is better."

The girl's face was scarlet; but Sam, who perhaps was not unaware that his words were not entirely unwelcome, was not to be easily stopped. Turning to the young minister, he said glibly, "Did you ever marry any one, Mr. Pitt?"

"I never did," responded Malachi Joseph.

"Then we'll have to give him a job, won't we, Esther?" demanded Sam.

"Sam Howe, if you don't stop, I'll leave the table!" exclaimed Esther, although preparations for her departure did not appear to be threatening.

"I'll stop. I said all I meant, and meant all I said."

"Have some more of the jam, Mr. Pitt," suggested Mrs. Horne as a means of diverting the conversation into other channels, although the expression of her face did not strongly imply that she very strenuously objected to its present course.

"No, I thank you," responded Malachi Joseph.

"You're not making out any supper at all! Have some more tea-biscuit. I know they're not very good, for I made 'em. If Esther had——"

"They are excellent, but I do not care for any more."

"Then try some of this cake."

"I dare not try again," laughed Malachi Joseph.

"I have already done what I am afraid I'll regret. This is Miss Esther's cake, I fancy."

"Yes, she made it," exclaimed her mother triumphantly.

"She makes the best cake in Acton," responded Sam quickly.

"It's a pity you can't find something better to talk about," suggested Esther, her face betraying her pleasure.

"I should be glad to have you tell me about the church—and people," suggested Malachi Joseph, who had been eager to learn some of the facts concerning his field of labor.

"That won't take long," remarked Sam with a laugh.

"I'm afraid that's so," assented Mrs. Horne. "You won't find things as you expect, I'm afraid, Mr. Pitt."

"I haven't known what to expect; so I don't believe I'll be disappointed. Is there much of a congregation?"

"Let me see; there's Deacon Griswold; he's about the closest man to the preacher, isn't he?" suggested Sam, winking at Esther as he spoke.

"You musn't mind what he says," spoke up Mrs. Horne, as her daughter began to laugh at the young

man's words. "Sam thinks he must have his joke. Deacon Griswold is a good man, one of the best in Acton. Since he's been growing older he is quite deaf, and so he has of late been sitting in the pulpit. He can hear better there, he says."

"He certainly is the oddest man," laughed Esther. "Why, last Sunday he took a pocket-comb out of his coat, and began to comb his hair when the minister was preaching! Just think of it!" And at the recollection Esther's glee broke forth afresh.

"You musn't think of those things, my dear," suggested Mrs. Horne in a tone of voice that was as proper as it was without influence. "You must remember what a good man Deacon Griswold is."

"I should think he would have broken up the congregation," suggested Malachi Joseph smilingly.

"He would if there had been any congregation there," retorted Sam. "That's what I started in to tell you about when Esther broke in with her story of the deacon's comb. He didn't realize what he was doing, of course, for he's the best-hearted man in the world. But the reason why he doesn't make any disturbance is because there isn't much of anybody there to disturb. There's Deacon Maxsen; he's as regular as Deacon Griswold, and just as good. Then there's Aunt Miriam——"

"She scares me to death," interrupted Esther lightly. "She always will speak to me, and tells me how she hopes I'll 'prove faithful,' and I don't know what all."

Somehow the girl's flippant words strangely irritated Malachi Joseph, and almost impatiently he turned again to Sam, and said eagerly, "Please go on and tell me about the rest of my congregation."

"That won't take long," laughingly responded Sam. "Let me see; I'd got as far as Aunt Miriam, hadn't I? Well, there's Mrs. Carter; she's always on hand, and you'll know her just as soon as you see her. She's a dried-up, wizened little woman, and whatever you do or say will be wrong. If the rest o' the folks want you to preach short sermons, she'll complain that they aren't long enough. And then she's great on all the doctrines—especially hell."

"Sam Howe, I'm ashamed of you!" simpered Esther.

"I'm speaking gospel truth; I'll leave it to Mrs. Horne if I'm not," said Sam, earnestly. "She stopped me the other day in the street and told me how she hoped the new preacher that was coming would do as he ought to; and when I asked her what that was, she said it was to do what the preach-

ers did when she was a girl. She said they used to talk about 'brimstone an' the lake that burned,' and I don't know what all; and one night, when she went home after a protracted meeting, she couldn't sleep. She just buried her head under the bed-clothes, and trembled like a 'popple' leaf. Is that the way you're going to do here, Mr. Pitt?" asked Sam in a tone that caused Esther to laugh again, a feat by no means difficult to accomplish, as the new minister was now aware.

Somehow the light words of Sam grated on Malachi Joseph's feelings. There was before him a momentary vision of the classroom in the Pilgrim Seminary when this very topic was up for discussion. But it was all different now, and the vital as distinct from the theoretical aspect of life was appealing to him.

"I hardly know what I shall do," he replied, quietly. "I have not had much experience, you know, but I have always believed the best way to keep men out of evil was to keep evil out of them. But surely these four do not make up the entire congregation?" he added.

"They're the main spokes in the wheel," replied Sam cheerfully. "Of course there are a few more like Mrs. Horne here and Esther, who are regular,

but aside from a few girls and women you won't find many there, I'm afraid."

"Don't you go?" inquired Malachi Joseph quickly.

"Regularly, though I'm likely to be a little late," laughed Sam loudly.

"He is there in time to see Esther home," explained Mrs. Horne graciously. "We'll hope he'll do better now," she added.

"There certainly is room for improvement," acknowledged Sam lightly.

"*Won't* you have some more of the jam, Mr. Pitt?" inquired Mrs. Horne.

Declining the urgent and oft-repeated request, Malachi Joseph soon with the others left the table, and in a brief time, under the plea of weariness, sought his own room. His heart was heavy, for he was convinced that the dilapidated condition of the church edifice and its surroundings was only a type of the condition of life itself in the worn-out little village and he feared that the repair of the one would be much more difficult than that of the other.

On the following day he called at the home of Deacon Griswold; but the worthy man was not to be found, and, when on Sunday morning Malachi Joseph faced for the first time the congregation whose

minister he had promised to be, the only faces he recognized were those of Mrs. Horne and Esther, the latter resplendent with ribbons, presiding at the little reed organ.

CHAPTER VIII

A MESSAGE

FOR the first time in his young life Malachi Joseph felt that he had something to say. In all his preceding oratorical efforts he had prepared himself to say something, but his observations during the preceding day had aroused within him a conviction that the first effort of his labors must be to put heart into the lifeless, forlorn little band of people who were looking to him for leadership. The rank weeds in the churchyard, the dilapidated condition of the building, the sagging walls, the weather-beaten sides, were all in keeping with the appearance of the adjacent fields of charred stumps that were eloquent of previous activities and of present stagnation, and were no less suggestive of the condition of the life of the people.

As he was aware that the interest with which he gazed into the faces of the thirty-four people that assembled that morning was keenly reciprocated, there arose in his heart for the first time the purpose to "bring some things to pass," an expression

which he recalled as a favorite one of Doctor Diggs, and it was something more than the mere spirit of youth that was shining from his face when the slow and quavering voices ceased singing the "second hymn" and Malachi Joseph began his first sermon.

There were no words of introduction, no formal expressions of hope or even of pleasure in meeting the men and women with whom he was now to labor; but he began at once to speak of that which was uppermost in his own mind. His theme was "preparation"; and unaware that the enthusiasm and interest in his subject were confined to himself, and that many of the expressionless faces before him indicated an ignorance of what he meant as sublime as if he were speaking in the Hebrew tongue, he quietly yet forcefully addressed his congregation.

"Our Lord has explicitly declared that he has gone to prepare a place for us, but he has no less clearly declared that we must be prepared for the place. In these days of great wealth it is comparatively easy for a man to prepare a fortune for his son, but the task of preparing his son for the fortune is a problem which many a millionaire has confessed has been beyond his powers. A man dies and leaves his wealth to found a college, but no one enters the college until he has shown by examina-

tion that he is prepared for that which has been prepared for him. A great and open door has been set before the church, a mighty work prepared for it; but the church itself must be prepared before it can enter, just as a young man must be equipped before he can enter the college, no matter what its endowment or opportunities may be."

Forcefully, earnestly, Malachi Joseph made this the theme of his opening sermon, undismayed by the frequent and nervous starts and turnings of Deacon Griswold, who, true to Sam's prophecy, occupied a chair on the platform of the pulpit, and eager that the people that heard him should understand that the law of the spiritual harvest was not unlike its analogy of the farmer and the soil in their relation to the harvest that was eagerly awaited. Stolidly, with expressionless faces the people had listened; and, when the final words had been spoken and the assembly dismissed, Malachi Joseph, the thrill of his own eager words still strong within him, expectantly awaited the response which he believed would be given to his appeal, for an appeal he had made.

His heart sank when he perceived that a goodly part of the assembly was departing without so much as a word of greeting. Malachi Joseph was too

young and inexperienced to know that some whose hearts were warm toward him were backward or bashful, or both, and feared to give expression to their real feelings. All that he could see was that only a few remained, and his hope and courage for the moment almost fled from him. There were several, however, who were waiting to greet him; and, striving to hide his own keen disappointment and chagrin, the young minister turned to receive the outstretched hand of Deacon Griswold.

"Glad t' see y', young man," shouted the deacon, his kindly face betraying the warmth of his feeling.

"Thank you," responded Malachi Joseph as he returned the greeting. "I'm glad we had such a beautiful morning for our opening service."

"Hey?" replied the deacon, placing an outspread hand behind his ear, and leaning forward as he spoke. "Speak a little louder, will ye? I'm a trifle hard o' hearin'."

"I said I was glad it was such a fine day," shouted Malachi Joseph.

"I don't quite catch it. Just speak up a bit louder."

Malachi Joseph leaned forward until his lips were close to the deacon's ear. His face was scarlet, for he realized how ludicrous his own position was and

how inane what he had to say appeared. "I said I was glad it was a fine day," he shouted still more loudly into the worthy man's ear.

"What day did ye say?"

"This! To-day! I'm glad it's a fine day!" thundered Malachi Joseph.

Behind the deacon, still seated before the little reed organ at the side of the pulpit, he could see Esther Horne burying her face in her handkerchief; and half in anger he realized that it was not sorrow or grief that apparently was overcoming her feelings.

"Yes! Yes!" replied Deacon Griswold in stentorian tones. "Fine day! Fine day! Good for the crops. Glad t' hev ye with us. What did ye say yer name was? I didn't quite catch it."

"Pitt," shouted Malachi Joseph.

"Hitt?" inquired the deacon, nodding his head and smiling.

"No. Pitt! Pitt! Pitt!" replied Malachi Joseph, his voice increasing in volume and power with each additional assertion. He was aware that Esther's feelings, whatever they may have been, had overcome her, and she was fleeing from the house.

"Yes, yes. Oh, yes, Pitt," acknowledged the deacon cordially. "Well, I couldn't quite hear all

't ye said this mornin', but I hope yer comin' will do us good. We've had so many men o' late that it's hard t' keep their names straight, t' say nothin' o' their sermons. But I'm glad t' see ye here, young man, an' I hope the Lord 'll bless ye in yer work."

The genuineness of the deacon's welcome was so apparent that Malachi Joseph's embarrassment was in a measure relieved, and he descended to receive the welcome of Deacon Maxsen, whose shining face was surrounded by a mass of white hair and whiskers not unlike a frame. The gentleness of the man was so apparent, however, that Malachi Joseph's heart was warmed to him, and then he turned to Aunt Miriam, who also was awaiting her turn. She was a stout, elderly woman whose goodness was apparent in every line and wrinkle of her beaming face. Here was a mother in Israel indeed, Malachi Joseph thought; and, as he listened to her words, somehow a feeling of restfulness crept over his heart. She was a woman whose mere presence was a benediction.

"I'm Mis' Carter," said a voice by his side sharply; and the young minister abruptly turned to behold a small, sharp-visaged little woman, apparently about sixty years of age, standing near him.

Instantly there flashed upon his mind the recollection of the description of this woman which he had received at the table of Mrs. Horne, and a chill as if a cold blast had struck him at once came over him.

"I am pleased to meet you," he responded cordially, without for a moment considering whether he spoke truly or not. The sharp little eyes of the woman were peering keenly at him, and he could not escape the conclusion that the glance was not altogether one of approval.

"I hope you're th' man we need here," she said sharply.

"I trust so too," he assented with a smile.

"Acton's a terrible place. We ought t' have a John th' Baptis' here. What we need to hear is, 'Repent!' and 'Repent! and yet again I say, Repent!' It's most dead in sackcloth an' in ashes."

"I sincerely trust that everybody will soon repent, Mrs. Carter, if that is what they most need." Malachi Joseph spoke quietly.

"Hey? I didn't say——" began Mrs. Carter sharply, and then abruptly changed the subject. "What do you intend to do first off?" she demanded.

"Become acquainted with the people."

"Then what?"

"I fancy I shall have to be shown that," said Malachi Joseph quietly.

"I've told ye already!" said Mrs. Carter tartly. "Acton's a dreadful place. It's the wickedest place in the county. An' we've had five ministers in five years, an' not one o' 'em has laid th' axe to th' root o' th' tree."

"Don't you think, Mrs. Carter," inquired Malachi Joseph quietly, "that perhaps there is a little preparation needed by us all before we begin to take others to task too sharply? I know I have a good many beams in my own eye, so many that I sometimes think I can't see very clearly to pull out the motes from the eyes of others."

For a moment Mrs. Carter stared at him as if she was not certain that he was not personal in his reply. Her intensity, however, quickly manifested itself, and she said, "I hope ye'll begin right away."

"I have begun."

"When?"

"This morning, when I spoke of the need of preparation. Next to becoming acquainted with the people, the first thing I shall try to do will be to have this house made more attractive. Just look at those weeds in the yard," and he glanced through the window as he spoke. "See the cracks in the

walls," and he pointed to the disfiguring lines as he spoke. "The building needs painting too. You can't expect people will want to come to a place that is not made attractive, can you?"

"Do you know what I think o' that?" demanded the woman, her eyes snapping as she spoke.

"I can't say that I do."

"Well, it's just pride; that's what it is, pride an' worldliness. We're to have our treasure in earthy vessels, ain't we? 'Tisn't th' vessel needs fixin' up; it's the treasure, let me tell you. When people want *that*, they won't be thinkin' much o' th' vessel what holds it. My man don't never ask me what kind o' dishes I set his victuals in; he's mostly interested in what they hold. An' it's th' same way in th' church. 'Tisn't th' outside; it's th' inside what needs fixin'. You fix that, an' I guess th' walls won't never trouble nobody!"

"I do not agree with you," said Malachi Joseph warmly. "Before any one can be respected he must make himself respectable. If the church people don't care enough for the house of God to make it partly as good as the houses they themselves live in, how can they expect any one else to place any value on what it teaches?" Malachi Joseph was not aware of it, but Mrs. Carter lived in the most

pretentious dwelling in Acton, and the effect of his words was consequently more direct. "One must prepare the way before he can expect any one to use it," he added.

"I don't believe no such thing!" retorted the woman hotly. "I've seen some powerful revivals here, an' th' most powerful was those when this building wasn't used much at all. They was house-t'-house and heart-t'-heart searchin'; that's what they was. It's nothin' but pride, young man; an' I must say I don't never expect t' see such meetin's again if you're jest goin' t' begin by cleanin' th' outside o' the platter when within is dead men's bones. No, sir, young man! What Acton needs an' what Acton's going t' have, if we have t' have seventeen times seven preachers, as the good Lord says, is one who's goin' t' call Acton to repentance, same's John th' Baptis' did when he went out o' th' wilderness o' Judea."

"I think we both want the same thing," said Malachi Joseph quietly as he turned to receive the words of the few others who had remained to greet him. There was a feeling of keen disappointment upon him, which not even the kindly words of his new friends could dispel. His feeling was so apparent that Aunt Miriam, who followed him to the

door, her face still shining, said to him: "There, my boy, don't take to heart too much what Mis' Carter said. Her bark is worse 'n her bite. You're right in what you said, an' I hope you'll go straight ahead. The Lord'll bless ye, I know he will; an' what we need in Acton most o' all is to do something for somebody besides ourselves, an' we've done little enough o' that."

"Thank you," replied Malachi Joseph warmly as he received the motherly blessing. "I'll come to see you so often you'll be tired of me. I need——"

He stopped abruptly as Tom Sanders, the driver of the stage, awkwardly approached. It was evident he was desirous of speaking to him, and Malachi Joseph said, "Did you wish to see me?"

"Yes, I've come for you. You're wanted at Hen Burdette's."

"Right away?"

"Yes. Hen's mother's dyin', an' I told 'im I'd come for ye. I'll walk 'long with ye if ye don't mind, for I've somethin' to say t' ye myself."

Together the two young men started in the direction of the place of sorrow, but in a moment even the call itself was forgotten by Malachi Joseph, so startled was he by Tom's words.

CHAPTER IX

CLOSE TO THE SHADOWS

“**I** WANTED t’ ask y’ a question,” said Tom in a low voice.

“All right,” replied Malachi Joseph, his mind so filled with the thoughts of the visit he was about to make that he failed to observe the dark expression on the face of his companion.

“I wanted t’ ask y’ if ye cared for Esther.”

“‘If I cared for Esther’!” exclaimed Malachi Joseph abruptly, turning upon Tom as he spoke. “Why, of course I care for her. She’s a fine girl, I should judge. She’s tender-hearted, and is certainly good to her mother. Of course I care for her.”

“I don’t mean *that* way,” said Tom savagely. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I think I do,” responded Malachi Joseph after a brief pause. “Not in the way you are thinking of,” he added with a smile.

“She’s all took up with you,” suggested Tom, the expression of his face nevertheless changing at the young minister’s words.

"She's a good friend, and interested in my work here, but that is all."

"I believe ye," said Tom, plainly relieved.

"But I thought—I suspected that Sam Howe had the right of way there."

Malachi Joseph spoke lightly, almost thoughtlessly, and he instantly perceived his mistake. The blood surged into Tom's face, and an expression of almost ungovernable rage swept over it. He swallowed several times almost as if the words were choking him, as he said in a low voice savagely, "Never you mind Sam Howe! I can attend to his case! He won't stand in my way very long!"

For a moment Malachi Joseph stared in astonishment into Tom's face, which appeared scarcely human in its flush of intense anger. He was face to face with some of the worst and basal passions of mankind, he quickly realized, and a great fear for the moment possessed him. The fires of life in Acton might have burned low, but like the charred stumps in the surrounding fields were also full of peril; for he had already learned that Acton lived in perpetual fear of forest fires. Tales had been told him of forest fires in the years gone by, and the sentiment of the little village was as a unit against a man who was careless with the destroying element.

Only a horse-thief belonged in the same category; and, if the people had been free to follow out their own sentiments, however low their sense of right or justice might have fallen in other lines, slight mercy would be granted to the malefactors of either of these two classes. And the thought of this condition was aroused in the mind of Malachi Joseph as he gazed at the face of Tom Sanders. Strength, resoluteness, dogged-faced, unreasoning persistence, he could plainly see were there; but they were all directed into a channel where only the instincts of the brute controlled. Tom could not fall, for he had never risen. He was like an enraged and savage animal, and the more dangerous on that account.

There was no opportunity to speak or observe more, for they had arrived at "Hen" Burdette's house; and Malachi Joseph, thanking his conductor, at once approached the door and knocked softly. Tom had already turned away, and with bowed head was making his way back to the village. The young minister, intent now upon his errand, again rapped upon the door, and with fast-beating heart awaited a response.

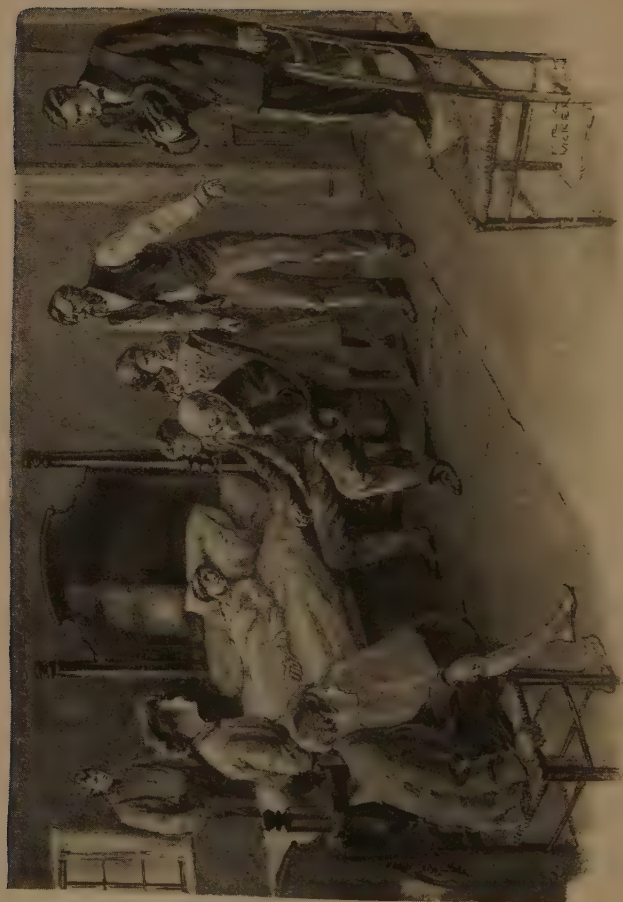
He soon heard the approach of shuffling feet; and in a moment the door was opened, and he beheld a

man standing before him who he instantly concluded must be Hen Burdette himself. Huge of frame, collarless and coatless, with hair disheveled and face rough with the growth of a beard that had been untouched for days, the appearance of the man once more forced upon Malachi Joseph the thought that here too, was an evidence of the backward life of Acton. As, in response to the invitation of the man, he stepped within, the appearance of the room coincided with that of the man who had greeted him. A few broken and unwashed dishes were on the table; the few chairs in the room were battered and broken; the bare floor was unswept; and the general air of neglect and decay was apparent on every side. The man's face, however, was red and swollen, and it was at once evident that he had been weeping. The thought of the "basal passions" again occurred to Malachi Joseph, and for a moment his heart softened as he was aware that affection also was to be counted as one of these.

"Be you the minister?" inquired the man.

"Yes, I am Mr. Pitt. I heard you were in trouble; so I came."

"That's good o' ye. Yes, mother's goin'; she's almost gone." The man's voice broke into sobs as he spoke, and for a moment choked his utterance.



"Here's the minister,"
announced Hen "

"I've been a dreadful bad son to her," he sobbed; "an' now she's leavin' us, an' I sha'n't never see her face no more. I've got drunk, an' I haven't took no care o' her. I tell ye, there's been no worse skunk 'n me in Acton, an' now I'm gettin' paid for it." Again the huge frame was shaken, and the genuineness of the man's grief was not to be denied. Malachi Joseph stood silent in the presence of such sorrow, and realized his own inexperience and helplessness as he had never realized them before.

"Come upstairs, will ye?" suggested the man; and Malachi Joseph followed as Hen Burdette led the way up a creaking stairway, and ushered him into a room wherein he was dimly aware that ten or more people were assembled, some standing about a bedside, some seated, and others leaning against the wall. Children were there too, and at the entrance of the minister stared in wonder at him for a moment, and then began to cry audibly. On the bed itself Malachi Joseph could see the feeble and wasted frame of an old, old woman whose hand was tightly clasped in that of a younger woman, evidently her daughter, who was seated on the side of the bed.

"Here's th' minister," announced Hen; and at once there was a stir among the people as Malachi

Joseph approached and looked down upon the wasted and wrinkled face over which already were creeping the shadows of the eternal rest.

"Here's th' minister, ma," said the woman who was holding the dying woman's hand. "You want to see him, don't you?" she pleaded as she bent lower over the shrunken frame.

The blue eyes of the aged woman opened and looked straight into those of Malachi Joseph as he leaned over her. The face nodded slightly, and after a tense silence of a moment the lips moved; but the young preacher could not hear the word she whispered. Her daughter leaned low, placing her ear close to the woman's lips, and in a moment looked up, a puzzled expression upon her face.

"I can't make it out," she whispered. "It sounds like 'shepherd.'"

"I know," said Malachi Joseph softly. "She wants me to read the Twenty-third Psalm. Please bring me a Bible," he added, turning to Hen Burdette.

"We ain't got no Bible," said the man stolidly. "I'll go git ye one," he added.

"No! No!" said Malachi Joseph quickly, as Hen Burdette prepared to leave the room. Don't go. I can repeat what she wants."

For an instant there arose a vision of David before the eyes of Malachi Joseph. Not now as a shepherd boy piping among his flocks or whistling in response to the calls of the curlews along the Bethlehem hillsides, but a vision of David as an old man, a fugitive from his own son Absalom, the usurper, standing, it might be, hopeless, forlorn, and wretched on some projecting crag among the same hills, and gazing down into the valley where he could see some shepherd caring for his flock, that, over-tired, was now trustfully resting beside the still waters. And Malachi Joseph fancied that he could almost see the expression on the face of the wearied fugitive king as, stirred by the sight, he too lifted up his voice, and in his new-born hope began to sing the Shepherd Psalm.

In a low voice, that trembled in spite of his efforts to control it, Malachi Joseph began: "The Lord is *my* shepherd. . . He leadeth *me* beside the still waters. . . He restoreth *my* soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of—the—shadow—of——"

Malachi Joseph was not able to go on—the pathos and the pity and compassion of it all were too strong. The smile on the face of the dying woman was eloquent of the effect of his words, and a warn-

ing gesture of the daughter showed that the aged woman was striving to speak again. Her eyes were wide open, and there was an expression of eagerness almost childlike in them as she whispered: "Yes, mother. You—told me—I might go. You—said you would come—too. I—am afraid—to—go—alone. I'm—glad—you are going with me. You must—not—forget—my doll——"

The trembling voice ceased, and in wonder that was not unmixed with awe Malachi Joseph gazed down at the wrinkled face, realizing that at the last this aged woman had forgotten her husband, forgotten her children and her children's children, and was again a child herself, calling to the mother who for a half-century had been in the land of shadows.

"I wish ye'd pray," said Hen Burdette brokenly.

Malachi Joseph knelt by the bedside and, in the presence of the eternal mystery, with a new-born conviction that only in the message that had been given him was to be found help for all those who for the first time, he distinctly realized, were to pass through this experience, with broken voice he offered such a prayer for help, for comfort, as had never before been in his heart, much less passed his lips.

When he arose, there was a slight fluttering of

the aged woman's eyelids, a sigh, and then the face settled into an expression of marvelous peace, and was still. For a moment the breathless watchers waited, and then there was a loud cry from the woman on the bedside.

"Oh, she's gone! My mother's gone!"

Instantly there was an outbreak of cries and sobs from those who were in the room that startled Malachi Joseph. The loud wailing seemed to him to be out of keeping with the solemnity of the moment. It was vulgar. Grief was something, however deep, to be kept to one's self; and the present apparent disregard of all others seemed to him to be wrong. Helpless he waited for the scene to pass; but, when the violence of the outbreak still showed no signs of diminishing, he approached the man, and, after being assured in broken words that there was now no immediate way in which he might be of assistance, he took his departure, promising to return on the morrow.

As he stepped out into the sunlight, it seemed to him for the moment that it must certainly be out of place. The experience through which he had just passed had almost overpowered him. It had, however, brought with it a new conception of what a part of his work was to be, and there came into

his heart an eagerness to help that was as novel as it was new.

Returning to the home of Mrs. Horne—his home now—he briefly explained the cause of his absence, and as soon as he had eaten the dinner which the good woman had saved for him he retired to his room. Late in the afternoon, refreshed and rested, he went down to the piazza, where to his surprise he perceived Tom seated beside Esther on the steps and eagerly talking to her. His presence was not so surprising as was the fluency with which he was speaking, and it was evident that Malachi Joseph's appearance on the piazza was as unwelcome to him as it was eagerly hailed by Esther.

"Tell me," said she as she hastily arose, "is Hen Burdette's mother dead?"

"Yes."

"He never has been much comfort to her."

"That's what he says," replied Malachi Joseph with a smile.

"He's just getting over a three-days' drunk now," said Tom.

"Does he work?" inquired Malachi Joseph.

"When he has to."

"What does he do?"

"He's helped me some when I've had extra

teamin' t' do. Ye see, since I bought out the stage line——”

“Do you own it?” inquired Malachi Joseph in surprise. He gazed at the heavy, expressionless features of Tom with new interest. Perhaps there was more in the man than he had believed, and beneath the apparently brutish countenance there was something of worth after all.

“Yes, I own it, though I haven't got it all paid for yet. Soon's I have, Esther——”

“Hush, Tom!” said Esther sharply; and Malachi Joseph could see that she was sincerely troubled, although she blushed furiously as she spoke.

“I'm not goin' t' hush,” persisted Tom doggedly. “I'm——”

“Here comes Sam Howe and Deacon Maxsen,” interrupted the girl. “I wonder if they can be coming here,” she added with a nervous laugh.

As Malachi Joseph turned to observe the approaching men, who already had entered the yard, he was startled by the expression he beheld for a moment on Tom's face. Such a look of malignity he never had before seen on a human countenance. It was gone in a moment, as Tom abruptly departed; but the young preacher's eyes were upon him as long as the driver's bulky form could be seen.

CHAPTER X

THE SURPRISE OF ACTON

WHEN Malachi Joseph turned again to greet the visitors, the sight of the gentle face of Deacon Maxsen somehow seemed to revive the impression which Acton as a village had produced upon him. Ashes! The fires had almost burned out. Even the gentleness of the man seated beside him—for Sam and Esther had at once withdrawn and left the two men to themselves—was that of one whose life lay all behind, and the calm was like that of a haven that had been gained after the storm had ceased. There were serenity and peace, but they were the result of the escape from peril and the disappearance of conflict rather than from control or mastery, and, despite the pathetic peacefulness of the deacon, Malachi Joseph was convinced that he was not to look for help, in the aggressive side of his labors at least, to the childlike man with whom he was conversing.

After reference had been made to the sorrow that had come into the home of Hen Burdette, and the

deacon had gently expressed the hope that the young preacher would make the most of his opportunity to impress upon Hen the "lesson" which was so much needed by him, Malachi Joseph, unable longer to repress the feeling which was uppermost in his own mind, said eagerly:

"Deacon, don't you think something can be done to make the church a little more attractive? The building is dilapidated, and the whole thing looks as if it had gone to seed."

"Why, I don't know. I'm sure I don't know. Come to think of it, it does look a little run down. What do you think should be done?"

"The roof ought to be fixed; the outside ought to be painted; the grass and weeds in the yard should be cut and——"

"Don't you think the first thing," suggested the deacon timidly, "is to build up the walls o' th' spiritual Zion?"

"That's what Mrs. Carter said. No, I don't think so. I think a church is just like a man—if it wants to be respected, it must make itself respectable. And our church here isn't that exactly."

"I don't know about that," suggested Deacon Maxsen. "It's seen some great times. Why, I rec'lect forty years ago, when——"

"Yes, yes, I know. Mrs. Carter told me there had been some great revivals years ago, and then she kindly informed me that she 'never expected to see the like o' them again.' I don't, either, unless we begin to show some signs of life ourselves."

"How much do you think the repairs would cost?" ventured the deacon tentatively.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought of that. Not very much, though, I am sure."

"Suppose you write t' th' secretary of the Home Mission Society, an' see if he can get an appropriation for us. He knows you're interested, an'——"

"I'm not going to ask him for a penny!" retorted Malachi Joseph sharply. "As I look at it, the church has already had too much done for it. What it needs most of all just now is to do something for itself."

"We're poor."

"I know that, but not so poor that we can't think of any one but ourselves! I tell you, Deacon Maxsen, a church has got to do and give before it can be blessed. That's the eternal law. This Acton church has become so accustomed to thinking it can't do anything, and so used to receiving, that it has almost ceased to be a church. If it will begin

to rouse itself and think of what this benighted community needs——”

“I guess ye’ll find we’re ’bout as intelligent as most communities o’ our size,” interrupted the deacon with the first trace of life Malachi Joseph had discovered.

“I’m not casting any reflections on the community,” explained the young preacher hastily. “If I hadn’t believed work could be done here, I should not have come. But I don’t believe a church in Acton or anywhere else can prosper if it doesn’t begin to work, or think of some one besides itself.”

“I thought ye came here to build up th’ church.”

“So I did, but by making the church begin to think of something else than what it gets from the Home Mission Society. I want it to make a contribution to the society itself. I want it to remember that it has been put here to help. And I tell you if I didn’t belong to the church, I don’t believe I should have very much faith in the religion of its members if it didn’t make them bestir themselves enough to cut the weeds in the yard or stop the leaks in the roof.”

“I don’t see how you’re goin’ to get it done,” persisted the deacon, “unless ye can get some one to help.”

"That's what I propose to do—just exactly that!" retorted Malachi Joseph; and the deacon smiled approval without a suspicion that he had not brought the young minister to his own way of thinking.

On the following day Malachi Joseph had an interview with Deacon Griswold, and that worthy official also thundered his own conviction into the ears of the young minister that, if he could secure an appropriation from the Home Mission Society for the purpose, the work might be done.

In no wise discouraged, he sought out Mrs. Carter, but in response to his suggestion she tartly informed him that she didn't believe "in no such plan," and reiterated her statement that he was "just tryin' t' cleanse th' outside o' the platter when within were dead men's bones." What Acton needed was to repent, and yet again repent. Of course, if the Home Mission Society was disposed to assist, that was another matter, though for *her* part she thought they would be in better business if they sent men up an' down th' land cryin' aloud, "Repent, an' yet again I say unto you, repent."

For the first time Malachi Joseph was somewhat downcast when he returned to his boarding-place that night. He had been so eager, so positive that his plan was good that the refusal of all those with

whom he had talked to believe in it had somewhat dampened his ardor. However, striving not to reveal his disappointment, he did not refer to his experiences, and soon after supper sought the seclusion of his room.

On the following day hope had returned, and his determination to accomplish what he had planned was even stronger than before, although there was no definite line of action before him. His supreme problem was first of all to arouse the little church to do something. It had been active at one time, but it was now striving to warm its soul by the flames of bygone fires. In its weakness it had sunk into an attitude of listless lifting of its hands for aid. And Malachi Joseph's soul rebelled.

The funeral service of the mother of Hen Burdette was held that afternoon; and, when the task was ended, the young minister was surprised when he learned that he was expected to return and take supper with the "mourners." Brought up as he had been in the country, Malachi Joseph was familiar with many of the customs; but he again perceived that Acton belonged to a period that would be considered remote even in Turnerville. There was an attempt at providing a feast in Hen Burdette's house. The loud wailing of the family at the grave,

the frequent and noisy tokens of their sorrow in the midst of the service he had held, were not unlooked for; but the feast that followed was strange to him, and it was exceedingly difficult for him to enter into what was evidently looked upon as a fitting and most appropriate close of the day. The dishes were more or less broken; the cloth upon the table perhaps at one time had been cleaner; and the food itself was a trial; but Malachi Joseph did his best, for the sorrow of the household was genuine, and touched his heart.

When at last he was free to depart, Hen followed him to the door. "We're dreadfully obliged to you," he said as he wrung the young preacher's hand.

"It's little enough I've done, but you are heartily welcome."

"There isn't anything I won't do for you."

Malachi Joseph looked into the face of the man, in many ways weak as a child, shiftless, lazy, impulsively good-hearted, and yet capable of an anger like that of a wild beast. Could anything be done for such a man? Suddenly he said, "Do you mean that, Mr. Burdette?"

"Why, yes, course I do. Just mention anything I c'n do fer ye, an' I'll do it."

"I wish you would bring your scythe, and meet me at the church to-morrow morning at eight o'clock."

"I dunno's I've got one, but mebbe I can borry one." Hen's surprise at the unexpected request was so manifest that his voice faltered.

"We can find one somewhere," responded Malachi Joseph cheerfully. "I'll expect you at eight o'clock in the morning."

And promptly at the appointed hour Hen appeared. The young preacher was awaiting his arrival and ready to enter into the plan he had formed. If the church itself lacked courage to undertake the improvements Malachi Joseph desired, then he would himself carry them out. In a brief time, divested of their coats, both he and Hen were at work, the rank weeds and high grass falling steadily before them. Deacon Maxsen passed by on the street, stopped, returned, and gazed as if he was minded to speak; then, perhaps his courage failing, withdrew in silence. Others not so backward hailed the men, unable to believe at first that what they saw was real. The sight of the minister engaged in such a task was not so startling as that of his assistant. But Malachi Joseph laughingly responded, and Hen doggedly held to his task.

The weeds and grass having been cut and raked, the loose stones in the yard were next collected, and then with a spade and a rake the overgrown walks were made presentable.

"There, Mr. Burdette, I think that will do," said Malachi Joseph when the day's work was ended. "Perhaps you'll be able to find the way to church next Sunday morning."

"I'm comin'," responded Hen eagerly. "I guess I could 'a' found it afore if I'd looked real hard for it."

"You won't have to look real hard now," laughed Malachi Joseph. "I shall be glad to see you. There's your pay," he added, handing his companion a bill.

"I don't want no pay," replied Hen, his face flushing a deep red. "It's th' first decent job I've done in a year. Instead o' payin' me, let me help you th' next time. It sort o' keeps me away from th' tavern."

"By all means. I'll be glad of your help. Good-night."

Not a word did Malachi Joseph say to any one concerning the task in which he and Hen Burdette had been engaged, but there was no lack of understanding that it was promptly known and frequently

commented upon by the people, for his congregation was larger on the following Sunday morning, and, when he came to the church, he could see that the people assembled in front of the building were pointing at the results of his labors. He overheard the sharp words of Mrs. Carter as he passed her concerning "the outside o' the platter" and "dead men's bones," but the effect was lost in the strength of the new purpose he had formed to paint the exterior of the church. There had been a moment when he had thought of applying to Gertrude Bingham for the young people in the church of which she was a member to send him money sufficient to buy the paint needed, but the result of Hen Burdette's labors in the churchyard, and the determination on his own part to rouse the church to do something for itself, prevented him. It was easy for him to secure the promise of the paint at the village store, for which he himself was to be responsible.

But the main part of his plan was to secure the aid of men not connected with any church to assist him in the task of painting.

Confident of the help of Hen Burdette, he next invited Sam Howe to assist, and at once received the promise of his aid.

Elated by his success thus far, Malachi Joseph

met Tom as he was returning to his home, and suddenly resolved to ask his aid also.

"Naw!" growled Tom in response to the request. "I don't b'long to the church. Let them look after their own concerns, same's I do mine."

"That's all right. I know just how you feel, and I feel something like that myself. But I do want to see the church made more attractive. I don't blame you, though. We'll get along all right. Henry Burdette and Sam Howe will help me."

"Sam? Sam Howe? He goin' t' help?" demanded Tom quickly.

"Yes." There was a twinkle in the eyes of Malachi Joseph as he responded.

"I guess I can give ye a little lift. I'll put in the time between my trips."

"Thank you. That's very good of you, and I appreciate it, I can assure you."

"When d'ye begin? Goin' t' do any paintin' yourself?"

"Yes, we'll begin to-morrow."

To the surprise of Malachi Joseph both Tom and Sam appeared on the following morning, but Hen Burdette did not come. Sam laughingly declared that Hen didn't "believe in the perseverance of the saints," but the young preacher was in no mood for

Sam's light-hearted remarks. The paint was speedily prepared, the tackles were arranged; and soon on one platform near the roof Malachi Joseph was busily painting, though he cast frequent glances down the street, still hoping that the recreant Hen might appear.

On a line parallel to that where the young minister was standing both Sam and Tom were working, the former whistling, singing, and laughing; the latter morose and glum even beyond his custom.

Great was the surprise of the Actonites when it was noised abroad that the church was being painted, and by whom. And that Tom should be one of the laborers—that was almost too much for even the most credulous! The men who seated themselves on the horse-block to watch the proceedings could not recall such a surprising event. There were queries and suggestions numberless, but not one afforded a solution.

Even the women came to watch; and, when Malachi Joseph at one time looked down, he beheld the genial face of Aunt Miriam as she stood beside Mrs. Carter. He laughed, and waved his hand at them, but did not for a moment abandon his labors. There was a smile on his face as he thought of what his classmates would say if they could see him in

his present occupation. And Gertrude Bingham! He could think of her without a qualm now, but his spirits rose as he knew she would approve. His face clouded for a moment, however, as the vision of the calm, strong face of Hannah seemed for an instant to rise before him. She too belonged to a past from which he had cut himself loose, he tried to assure himself, though the assurance was not altogether comforting. He could hear the voice of Esther now calling to him, and all three men instantly ceased working and looked down.

"Don't you want some cold water, Mr. Pitt?" she called.

"Thank you, yes," he responded with a laugh.

As the girl departed, he turned back to his task; but he could see that both his fellow-laborers were still idle, their eyes fixed upon Esther as she ran lightly across the yard. There was an expression of intense malevolence in Tom's eyes as he slowly turned his head and looked at Sam, and a moment later there was a loud cry from the men below as it was seen that the rope where Sam was standing was slipping, and it was evident that he was falling from his position just below the eaves of the church.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE REAR OF DEACON GRISWOLD'S BARN

STARTLED as the young minister was by the sight of the peril of his companion, he was nevertheless aware of the expression on the up-turned faces of the men below him. Among them he could see that of Hen Burdette, who had just joined the group of spectators; and Malachi Joseph even in the brief glance could see that the man was intoxicated. The failure to report that morning was therefore fully explained, and for a moment Malachi Joseph was conscious of a feeling of bitter disappointment and disgust. Had the man's promises meant nothing? Had his own efforts in this man's behalf met only with a response that all who knew Hen Burdette had confidently predicted would be the outcome? It certainly was disheartening, but the momentary impression was quickly dispelled as he instantly turned to the aid of Sam. Ladders had been used as the bases of the swinging platforms on which the painters were standing, and lengthwise over these boards had been

placed. The rope which had held the end of the staging on which Sam had been standing was slipping, and in a moment the boards and ladders both would slide from their places.

Tom Sanders was holding grimly to the rope at his end, which apparently was secure; but in a moment it was evident that Sam's end was destined to fall. The young man was clutching the end of the sliding ladder, which was already tipping sharply. He had not uttered a cry since the peril had been discovered; but the expression of terror on his face was plainly visible to Malachi Joseph, and instantly roused the young minister to action. For some reason a coil of unused rope had been left on his own platform, and, quickly leaping for it, he flung it toward the young man, at the same time retaining an end in his own hands.

"Hi, Sam!" he shouted in his excitement. "Catch it! Catch it!" At the same instant he made the end, which he had retained in his own grasp, fast about the rounds of the ladder on which he was standing, and stood in an agony of fear as he watched to see whether or not the other end of the rope could be seized by Sam.

A shout arose from the spectators as Sam grasped the rope in his outstretched hands at the very mo-

ment when his support finally gave way, and the falling boards and ladder started with a crash to the ground, leaving Tom clinging to his own rope and with his feet resting on the huge hook. His companion swung with a resounding thump against the side of the church, but still retained his grasp, and then like a pendulum vibrated in the air only a few feet above the ground. The shock when the rope was drawn taut almost flung Malachi Joseph from his position, but he had already grasped the rope that supported his platform, and by its aid was enabled to retain his hold; and in a moment Sam dropped to the ground and was safe. Eager hands had already seized the ladder which had fallen, and lifted it to the place where Tom Sanders was clinging to his support; and he too was enabled to make his way in safety to the ground. A shout went up from the little assembly that in silence had watched his descent, and as soon as Malachi Joseph was assured that both were unharmed he too made his way to the ground. His own face was pale from his excitement; but, as he glanced at Sam, he saw that the young man's face was ghastly.

"How did it happen, Sam?" he inquired in a low voice. "Wasn't the rope fastened? Did it break, or what was it?"

"I didn't fasten the rope on that end," said Sam.
"I fixed the other, and Tom fixed this."

"What was wrong, Tom?" inquired Malachi Joseph, turning to the man as he spoke.

"Nothin' 's far as I know," replied Tom glumly.
"'Twas all right when I left it. I guess Sam must 'a' monkeyed with it."

There was an expression in Sam's eyes that instantly convinced Malachi Joseph that further conversation at the time and place would be unwise; and, striving to conceal his own anxiety by an air of relief which was not entirely genuine, he said lightly: "Well, we're all safe, anyway, however the accident happened. Sam, you'd better not try it again."

"I don't intend to to-day," replied Sam quietly.

"That's right!" exclaimed Hen Burdette, lurching heavily forward. "Bes' go home, Sam. I'll take your place." The man's eyes were bleared, and it was only by an effort that Malachi Joseph repressed his feeling of disgust as he looked at him. But Hen Burdette was not to be repressed. Grasping the young minister's hand with a grip that was like that of a vise, he began in a maudlin way, crying in a half-human whine: "I'll sthand b' you, Mr. Pitt. You sthood b' me, an' I'll sthand b' you."

He still retained his grip on Malachi Joseph's hand, and wrung it in a fashion that caused the young minister to wince. "Goo' man! Goo' man!" murmured the drunken fellow. "Jes' th' kind o' man my poor ol' mother wanted me t' be."

"You're in no condition to help now, Mr. Burdette," protested Malachi Joseph, succeeding at last in freeing his hand. "You can come to-morrow and help."

"Naw! May not be here t'-morrer. I'm here now. Shee me?"

"Yes, I see you."

"Oh, but you don' like what you shee?" The man spoke thickly, and began again to weep in his disgusting maudlin way. "I shee. You don' b'lieve I can do it. I'm jes' 's goo' a painter as—as——"

"Let him try it. He'll be all right," suggested Sam. "I'd stay myself, but——"

"No, you're not to stay," interrupted Malachi Joseph hastily. "You can try if you want to, but I'm afraid for you," he added, turning to Hen Burdette.

The man lurched forward, and at once began to haul on the rope, while the young minister hastily took his own position. Despite his fears, the platform was raised, and Hen Burdette began to work

with the brush. Tom too secured some one to take Sam's place, and the other staging was soon alongside the one on which the minister was standing, and the task was once more resumed.

No one spoke, and soon the watching assembly mostly dispersed, for there was slight interest to Acton observers if the work was to be done in silence. Malachi Joseph's anxiety for his companion soon wore away; for Hen to all appearances was working steadily, and the evidences of his intoxication could not be seen.

About the middle of the afternoon the work was discontinued to enable all the workers to attend to other duties; and, when the men had lowered the staging and were about to depart, Hen Burdette said in a low voice, "Would you mind walking home with me, Mr. Pitt?"

Malachi Joseph was tired by the labors of the day, and for a moment he hesitated. A bath and a good rest before supper had been in his thoughts, but the eager expression in Hen's eyes caused him to say quickly, "I'll go with you, Mr. Burdette."

Not a word was spoken by either of the two men until they were near the abode of the Burdettes, and Malachi Joseph was almost angry that he had yielded to the apparently purposeless request of his

companion. Suddenly Hen stopped, and, grasping the young minister's hand, again wrung it fiercely as he said, "I s'pose ye think 'twas queer I asked ye to come 'long with me."

"Did you want to say something to me?"

"No, that's not it exac'ly, not exac'ly. I might's well out with it. I was afraid. That's it. That's it, exac'ly."

"'Afraid'? Afraid of what?"

"Afraid I'd stop at Palmer's on th' way home."

For a moment Malachi Joseph stared into the face of the man before him. "Palmer's" he had already learned was the worst place in Acton. Nominally a hotel, it was a resort of the lowest and vilest characters in all the region, and instantly he comprehended the strange plea of Hen for him to accompany him home. He had been afraid that he would not be able to resist the temptation to stop at Palmer's, and even Malachi Joseph knew what such a stop implied.

There was an expression of pity on the young preacher's face as he said warmly: "I'm glad you asked me, Mr. Burdette. You did just right. I'll do it any time you want me to."

"Will ye? Will ye? exclaimed Hen eagerly. "Would ye mind stoppin' for me in th' mornin'?"

I don't like to trouble ye, but ye see——” and the man stopped for a moment in confusion. “Ye see ye don't know much how such a good-for-nothin' skunk 's I be feels. But sometimes I jest can't keep away from there. When I get home, I 'pear t' be able t' stan' it; but it's gettin' home what troubles me. I don't s'pose ye know anythin' about it, how I feel, but——”

The weak face of the powerful man was almost pathetic in its appeal, and Malachi Joseph's heart was deeply touched. “Are you going to help me paint, to-morrow?” he inquired.

“Sure I be. I've nothin' else t' do, an' I feel better when I'm round where you be. Mebbe, 'f I can go two or three days, 'twill be a bit easier——”

“I'll come for you to-morrow morning at half-past seven,” said Malachi Joseph quickly.

“Thank ye.” And with a final wrench of the young minister's hand Hen Burdette bolted for his house.

Malachi Joseph was unusually thoughtful as he turned away and started by a pathway that led him behind some of the houses across lots to the street on which Mrs. Horne's abode was located. The strange fall of Sam from the scaffolding still perplexed and troubled him; and the confession of Hen

Burdette, less than a child in his moral nature, though possessed of a body that was as powerful as any he had ever seen, was still fresh in his thoughts. Surely in Acton he was finding human nature in its raw form, and the meaning of his message and of his own presence in the little town, which even its oldest inhabitants acknowledged had "slipped back," came to him in a new and stronger light. Then too, his thoughts turned back to his own boyhood home, and somehow the face of Hannah rose again before him, strong, gentle, true. Why was it that he could not banish her from his thoughts? He could not explain to himself the longing for her companionship at least, a feeling that had increased with the passing of the days, as he was not able to disguise even to his own soul.

Almost unaware of the direction he was following, he had drawn near to the barn in the lot behind Deacon Griswold's house, and suddenly he became aware of the sound of voices on the side of the barn which was concealed from his sight.

The voices were low, but the intense anger which possessed the men (there were two engaged in the quarrel, as Malachi Joseph quickly perceived) was apparent; and, startled by the sounds, he instantly stopped and listened.

"You fixed that rope on purpose," one said.

"That's a lie, and you know it," responded the other savagely.

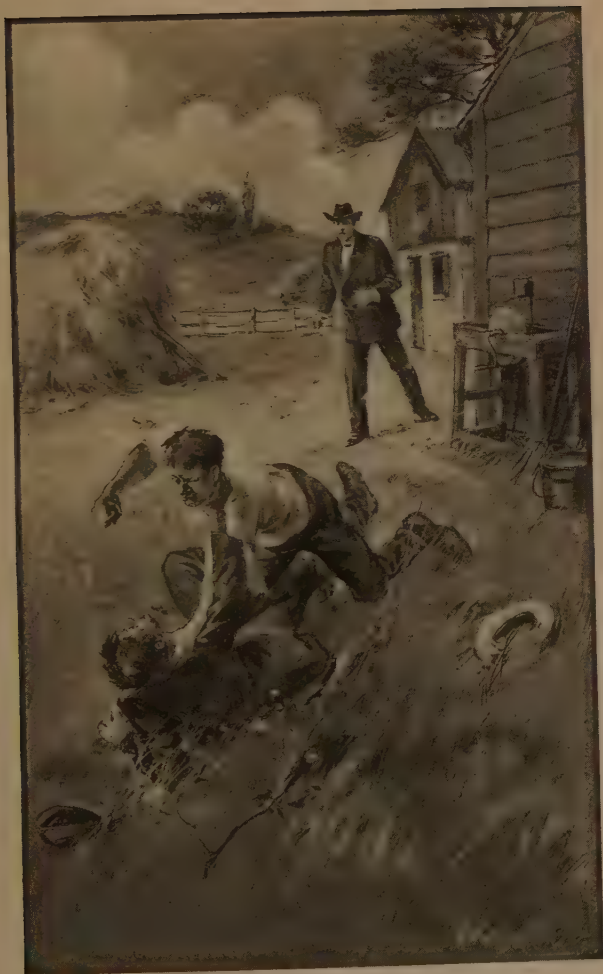
"I'll leave that to Esther. She'll be a better judge than either o' us."

"You say one word about it to Esther, and I'll——"

The threat was not completed; for there was the sound of a quick blow, and this was followed by a struggle in which the panting of the contestants sounded almost like the snarls of some savage beasts. Without hesitating a moment Malachi Joseph darted around the corner of the barn, and found himself face to face, as he expected, with Sam and Tom locked in a deadly embrace and struggling fiercely.

The young minister was not a weakling, and without a thought threw himself upon the struggling men. His own strength, added to the consternation aroused by his sudden appearance on the scene, produced a lull; and, quick to take advantage of it, he said: "You two stand apart! Do as I tell you!" he added as the men glared at each other and seemed to hesitate.

"Do as I tell you!" said Malachi Joseph again sternly. "If I did right, I'd tell Esther about you



“Malachi Joseph darted
around the corner of the barn.”

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both, and advise her to have nothing more to do with either of you."

Both young men stepped back silent but still glaring fiercely at each other, and the face of Tom Sanders was almost murderous in its expression, though that of Sam slightly lighted up for the moment.

"Now drop this, and both of you go home! Go now!" demanded Malachi Joseph.

"Let him go first," growled Tom, pointing at his enemy as he spoke.

"I didn't begin it, but I'll go," said Sam laughing uneasily.

"I'll go too if you'll promise not to tell Esther," growled Tom.

"I'll promise if you'll promise that this is the end of it," said Malachi Joseph.

"If Tom's had enough, I'm satisfied," said Sam.

But Tom made no response, nor did he lift his eyes to the minister.

"Oh, well, I won't put it that way," said Malachi Joseph. "I'll leave it to your own sense of honor, of decency. Fighting here like two snarling curs, and neither of you with sense enough to see how you disgrace the girl you pretend to love by dragging her name into a quarrel like this! I'll not tell

Esther about it, and I hope you'll both show yourselves more worthy of her regard. I'm sure you will. You've given me your word for it, and I'll take it and leave you here. Good afternoon," he added, and at once departed from the place without looking back to discover whether or not the two young men had been true to their word.

Malachi Joseph did not refer to the encounter that night; and yet, as he saw Esther laughing, clad in a dress with an apparently increased number of ribbons, he almost felt guilty for his silence. The girl was thoughtless, but her vanity was close to the border of the tragical, for her attitude toward Sam certainly had not discouraged him, while her relations with his rival had been of a character that had stirred the depths of Tom's brutish and passionate soul. And apparently she had been pleased with the attentions of both, and even found a certain pleasure in their fierce and savage rivalry.

On the following day Tom appeared at the church when Malachi Joseph came with Hen Burdette, and his apparently light heart was exceedingly puzzling to the young minister in view of the fact that Sam did not join them. However, three others, roused by the activity of the preacher, joined the toilers; and by Friday night the Acton church stood forth

to view in its new and somewhat startling garb of fresh paint. Tom had come every day and assisted; and his assistance had been most valuable, as Malachi Joseph cordially acknowledged to him when the task at last was completed.

But Sam had not once been near the building, nor had he made his accustomed daily visit at the Horne home, much to the dissatisfaction of Esther, who tossed her pretty head defiantly, and declared that "she guessed she could get on without Sam Howe." Meanwhile, Tom apparently was doing his utmost to atone for his rival's neglect, and there were few hours in the day, apart from his journeys to Smithville, when he was not in Esther's home.

To all appearances his visits were now welcome, for Esther laughed continuously; and, if she irritated her visitor, as she before had been prone to do by her ways, not one was aware of it, and Tom least of all. If there appeared at times in Esther's eyes a far-away expression, or if she gave a look longingly up the street through which Sam was accustomed to drive into the village, they were alike well-concealed, and Tom was too content to be suspicious.

A week elapsed, and still Sam's failure to appear was unexplained. Just seven days after his last appearance in Esther's home she received a letter with

the faint postmark of a little town in Michigan upon the envelope, and in her simplicity and confidence she read the missive aloud to her mother and Malachi Joseph:

DEAR ESTHER: I've left Acton to never come back again; so good-by. I hope you'll be happy. Your friend,

SAM.

"He might at least have told me so," said Esther, her eyes filling with tears as she looked up after reading the letter.

"Yes, dear," replied her mother; "but he's gone, and I should put him out of my mind."

"He's a hateful old thing, and I never liked him a bit!" exclaimed the girl with a sob as she fled from the room.

Just three weeks from that day Malachi Joseph performed his first marriage service when in the little home of the widow Horne he pronounced the solemn words that made Thomas Sanders and Esther Geraldine Horne husband and wife.

There were grave misgivings in the young minister's heart at the time, and his forebodings were many; for not another word had been heard from the missing Sam, and the haste with which Esther had prepared for her marriage had been to him as unseemly as it was strange.

CHAPTER XII

THE DISCOVERY

ESTHER had moved into a little house opposite her mother's; and, as the days passed, Malachi Joseph became convinced that the girl was at least measurably content. The house itself was one which had belonged to Tom's father, and had fallen to the stage-driver as the sole heir; this with the purchased horses and stage made up his possessions. Here Esther, who was as neat and tidy in her housekeeping as she was in her personal attire, soon had the place spotless and indeed, attractive, as she rearranged the belongings and added many a touch that was indicative of her own taste. The pride of her mother in the girl's skill and deftness became to Malachi Joseph almost a wearisome subject of conversation; but he listened quietly to Mrs. Horne's glowing and continuous tributes to her daughter's accomplishments, and the feeling of anxiety with which he had watched the early stages of the life in the new home gradually wore away when he heard Esther singing as she went about

her daily tasks; and her visits to her mother's house, which were of almost hourly occurrence, never failed to reveal her continued enthusiasm and pride in her housekeeping abilities.

Tom too had changed, and apparently for the better. He regularly attended the services in the little church; and, though his stolid face never betrayed any appreciation or interest, the young minister was rejoiced that the stage-driver at least did not oppose the activities of his young wife, and indeed appeared to take a certain pride, if not pleasure, in them.

Meanwhile, Malachi Joseph had succeeded in still further improving the appearance of the forlorn little building in which his congregation was accustomed to assemble. Tom Sanders had been a valued assistant in all the labor, and Hen Burdette too, had granted his aid. The latter had followed Malachi Joseph about, driving for him when he was called to a distance, or keeping by his side when the young minister was laboring to repair the crumbling "horse-blocks" in front of the church or to restore the roof of the horse-shed to its proper position. There was something in Hen's devotion that was suggestive of the affection of a faithful dog to its master. It was true that Hen had fallen repeatedly,

but his contrition when he recovered was so genuine, and his affection for the young minister was so intense that somehow Malachi Joseph never entirely lost heart, though he found himself frequently wondering whether or not the weak and characterless man would continue his efforts if by any change he himself should be taken away.

In the church-membership Malachi Joseph found little to encourage him. There was an apathy that was almost deadly. There was no opposition to his various plans, save an occasional sharp protest from Mrs. Carter; but the young minister sometimes found himself longing even for that, for at least it would be a sign of life. Anything would be better, he assured himself, than the sluggishness of death. Acton had settled into a groove; but it was an inclined groove, and at the base was death. Certainly it was a lack of life that was in the very air; and, if Acton ever had been alive, as some of its inhabitants confidently asserted, then the present state was like that of a worn-out old man or of one who was dying.

For a time the effect was almost deadly upon Malachi Joseph himself. His enthusiasm was chilled, his hopes dampened, his very purposes thwarted, not by oppression or opposition, but by the deadly

apathy and indifference. Apparently his own example was without effect; his appeals met with no response; and his work seemed destined to fail. The one bright spot in his life was the never-failing faith of Aunt Miriam. Her words of appreciation and cheer came like rain-drops on a thirsty soil, and he found himself seeking her presence much as Hen Burdette sought his, though the thought of the resemblance never once occurred to Malachi Joseph himself.

One Sunday afternoon, almost instinctively in his loneliness and hunger of heart he had gone to Aunt Miriam's humble little house, and, as he had expected, he found her seated in a chair on the porch behind the wild-cucumber vine which shaded it, her open Bible on her lap, her spectacles lifted upon her forehead, and her face beaming with the joy indicative of her deep inward peace. She greeted the young minister cordially, told him with smiles of the help his morning sermon had been to her; and, as he took the seat she indicated on the piazza beside her, Malachi Joseph felt that his burden already was lighter as he gazed upon her shining motherly face.

"I don't know," he said; "I sometimes think I can't do any work here. Everything has been run-

ning down so long that it seems to have got under such headway that nothing can stop it. The church makes me think of the ashes in the grate of a stove. There may have been fire there once ; but the trouble is, there's nothing to kindle now."

"No, my boy; that's not it. It's like a hickory-knot and pine-shavings. It takes more to start one than the other. That's all."

"But it is so hard," suggested Malachi Joseph dejectedly.

"Did you expect to find it easy, my son?" The voice was gentle and sympathetic, but Malachi Joseph's face flushed slightly at the implied rebuke.

"No; I can't say I did," he responded with a smile.

"I'm glad, for then you're not disappointed. It's Mount Zion you're climbing, you must remember. I don't know that Abraham found it easy to go out from his home and kindred. I don't think Moses had many days of ease in his thankless job. I'm sure the good Lord himself didn't find many roses in his pathway, though I b'lieve they did cast a few palms before him one day; but they'd forgotten all about it the next. Not one o' those men didn't give up, though, did they? I mean Abraham an' Moses an' the Lord."

“No.”

“Of course they didn’t. They’d been sent to do that work, an’ they found their highest joy in doin’ it. ‘None o’ these things move me,’ said Paul; an’ I’d like to have you think over what ‘these things’ meant. I’ve seen a bit o’ the hardness of life myself. I’ve lost every one o’ my five children, an’ for nigh onto thirty years I’ve been doubly lonely since my dear husband was taken from me. Sometimes the widow’s cruse o’ oil has looked pretty full to me when I opened *my* cupboard door, but I’ve been kept all the way an’ all the time. My times are in His hand; and, when I stop to think that the good Lord has something still for me to do, and that’s why I’m here, and then when I think o’ what’s beyond—why, I can’t be thankful enough. I don’t often speak o’ this,” she added simply.

Malachi Joseph looked up into the saintly face, and he thought of Moses whose face was shining, though he “wist not.” Here was the reality of life. This was worth striving, laboring, yes, even waiting for, the hardest of all.

“Now, my son,” resumed Aunt Miriam, “I don’t believe the Lord sent you here because there wasn’t any work to be done. He sent you just because there was a work and you were the one to do it.

It's his work you are doing. You can't fail. Haven't you got his word for it?"

"Yes," replied Malachi Joseph simply, as he rose to depart.

As he walked homeward, he felt somehow that the crisis had been safely passed. He had been sent to Acton just because the work must be done. The very deadness, the apparently worn-out life of the community, it was his task to arouse once more. Something of the fires of enthusiasm were rekindled in his own heart, and at once he began to think over various means of creating an interest of some kind in the sodden community. He was still convinced that his foremost task was to stir the people somehow.

But how was it to be done? His repairs to the church building, though he himself had labored with his own hands to accomplish them, had failed to produce much of an impression. A few attended church, it was true, whose faces had not been seen there before; but aside from Tom Sanders and Hen Burdette none had become regular, and he was by no means positive that even these two could be relied upon when their new interest had ceased to be new.

"I've got somethin' t' say t' ye, Mr. Pitt.

Malachi Joseph glanced up quickly as he heard the sharp voice of Mrs. Carter. He had been so engrossed in his own thoughts that he had failed to perceive the approach of the woman; and even when he was roused from his reverie the sight of the face of the woman somehow reminded him of a wasp, and he roused himself for what, he was convinced, was to follow.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Carter," he responded, lifting his hat as he spoke.

"We've got to do somethin' for th' young people. They're jest driftin' away, an' th' first thing we know there won't be none left," she began sharply.

"I was thinking about that very thing."

"I'm glad you were. Now I'm goin' t' get up a lawn festival, and hold it in the yard o' th' church next Wednesday night."

"Yes?"

"I'll have the girls make ice-cream an' the boys buy it."

"What will you do with the money you receive?"

"Buy tracts," snapped Mrs. Carter triumphantly. "I'll take the money we raise at the festival, an' buy tracts, an' have the children distribute 'em from house to house. That's jest what I'll do! Somehow Acton's just got t' be reached; an', if

you won't do it in th' pulpit, then some o' us must do it from hand t' mouth, an' heart t' heart, an' house t' house."

"Do you think it will be wise to have children do that work? I confess I don't. I have no objection to the festival, though I cannot say I like the idea of charging a fee, as you suggest."

"I guess ye don't read your Bible very much, then," snapped Mrs. Carter. "Didn't the Lord feed fifty thousand one day, all a-settin' on the green grass? What he did, I'm thinkin', we might do here in Acton."

"Yes, he fed five thousand," admitted Malachi Joseph; "though, if he charged ten cents a plate, I must have failed to find it."

"Hey? What's that ye say? Well, I guess he took th' widow's mite, didn't he? I guess he made the money-changers give up their change in the temple, didn't he?"

"I do not object to the festival," said Malachi Joseph, ignoring the questions; "but, if there is money to be raised, I confess I believe the best way is just to raise it. Let the people give it because it's right, and the right never harmed any one."

"Folks here haven't got any money. They're like the widow with her mite."

"And yet she gave it. And it was her 'all,' wasn't it?"

"We're poorer 'n wood, an' gettin' poorer all the time! I don't see what the Home Mission Society can be thinkin' of. They're all the time talking about th' I-talians an' the Hungrians an' the Cunarders what's comin' to our shores, but they aren't doin' much for th' Americans. Th' ain't many o' th' foreigners comin' t' Acton as far 's I can see an' my eyes haven't never gone back on me yet! What's goin' to become of some o' these poor churches I can't bear to think on, an' they're native Americans too."

"I agree with you," said Malachi Joseph soberly. "I believe in doing for all, and the work among these dying churches in the country appeals to me very strongly. I cannot believe people in the cities realize how they are decaying or what a little more care would do for them. Nor do I think the people in these churches realize how much more they can do for themselves than they are doing now. It is a great problem, Mrs. Carter. It does seem to me our church ought at least to raise as much money as the Home Mission Society is now giving us; but even that is more than we do now."

"Will ye come to the festival?" interrupted Mrs.

Carter. "That's what I'd like t' know at jest this minit."

"Certainly."

To the surprise of Malachi Joseph the "festival" was a pronounced success, and the assemblage was large, and for the first time displayed enthusiasm. Full of his own new projects, the young minister busied himself among the people on the lawn, and secured the promises of fifteen young people to join a chorus class which he himself promised to train if they would assist in the services of the church. The younger boys and girls were organized into a class which was to meet him on Saturday afternoons, when he was to read to them or tell them stories, or go with them into the fields or woods, where their interest grew as he called to their attention a hundred wonderful objects, seen many a time before, but never before observed by them. He frequented the baseball grounds, and even joined in the game, thereby greatly shocking Mrs. Carter, but marvelously impressing the boys with his prowess.

At the end of three weeks the success which had attended his efforts to interest the younger people had met with a response that was marvelous in his own eyes. Aware that novelty had much to do with the apparent success, he labored to turn the efforts

into channels that should be more enduring. He was busy day and night, and was fertile in new plans and projects. He was thinking of forming reading-classes, libraries, and a half-dozen other means of getting the people interested in something, and then he believed it would be easier to lead them to the supreme purpose for which he had come to Acton.

Another project which started with enthusiasm was that of holding services Sunday afternoons in the neighboring little hamlet of Smithville, where there was no church of any kind. To his surprise, when he announced his plan, Mrs. Carter of her own free will placed in his hands the "ice-cream money," to be used in paying for the rent of the hall in which the services were to be held. Malachi Joseph accepted the offering, and his pleasure was increased when his newly formed chorus promised to go with him and assist in the work at Smithville by their singing. Even Tom Sanders (perhaps at the suggestion of Esther) volunteered to give the use of his stage to convey the party, and the interest of all apparently was keen.

Already Malachi Joseph fancied that he could see a change in the attitude of his own church, and certainly his congregations were increasing, and his conviction was strengthened that the only way for a

work to prosper in a church was by inducing the church itself to work for some one else. Matters were beginning to move, he assured himself enthusiastically, and even the fear that the novelty of his plans would soon lose its effect ceased to trouble him.

The first service in Smithville was well attended. Here his work was not "preparation," but to bring a message. He spoke of the "lost," and, basing his talk on the beautiful words of the fifteenth chapter of Luke, drew a picture of the man who had lost his way as the sheep had, lost the power of being of any use, like lost coin, and then of the man who had lost himself like the wayward prodigal. Then he reversed the picture, and told of the "finding." As he was himself deeply in earnest, it was not strange that his hearers were also impressed, and Malachi Joseph's heart was light when at the close of the service one aged woman approached him, and with trembling voice said: "I come seven mile t' hear ye t'day. I live over by the 'barrens,' an' this is the first time I've been t' meetin' in six year. *Won't* ye come again next Sunday?"

"Yes, next Sunday, and every Sunday," replied Malachi Joseph. And he was already planning for

a Sunday-school, believing he could induce some of the young singers to aid him in this also, as they had by their music in the other service.

On the ride back to Acton, Malachi Joseph was in the stage with Esther and four others. There was great enthusiasm over the success of the labors of the day, and even Tom's dull face betrayed a seeming interest.

The stage was within sight of Acton when Esther suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the border of the woods by the roadside: "Did you ever see such goldenrod in your life? Stop a minute, Tom; I must get some."

"You don't want any goldenrod," said Tom glumly. "It's nothin' but a weed."

"Yes, I do want some, Tom," Esther laughed gaily. "You just stop your horses, and do as I tell you!"

Reluctantly, though there was a suspicion of a grin on his face, Tom halted his team, and Esther leaped lightly to the ground.

"I'll be back in a minute," she called with a laugh as she crept through the crooked rail fence, and then began hastily to pluck the gorgeous branches of the golden-hued "weed," as Tom had termed it.

In her zeal her hands were speedily filled, and then she turned back toward the fence.

"Got enough, Esther? Want some more?" inquired Tom.

"No. I've got enough, thank——"

Suddenly the girl stopped, and every one of the party could see an expression of unutterable horror creep over her countenance. The flowers dropped to the ground, and as she placed both hands to her face, scream followed scream from the colorless lips.

Startled by the evident terror of the girl, Malachi Joseph leaped from his seat in the stage, and instantly clambered over the fence, rushing to the side of the girl, who was sobbing now, while her body was shaking and trembling like a leaf in a storm.

"What is it, Esther? What is it?" he inquired tenderly. "What has frightened you? What—— Oh! oh! o-o-oh! Oh! my God! My God!" he cried in agony as he looked down upon the ground directly in front of the place where the terrified girl was standing.

There, protruding from the pile of leaves that covered the rest of the body, was the loathsome, discolored, upturned face of Sam Howe, staring with dead and half-closed eyes up into his own.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ROUSING OF ACTON

THE startled young people in the stage gazed in silence at the ghastly face of the young minister, a nameless terror inspiring them all, though not one had seen the source of the alarm. For a moment Malachi Joseph stood gazing down at the gruesome sight; then, rousing himself by a mighty effort of his will, with trembling hands he assisted Esther through the fence. The sobbing girl, hardly able to stand, leaned upon him for support; and, perceiving her condition, Tom instantly flung the reins over the dash-board as he sprung from his seat, and lifted her bodily back to the stage.

"What is it, Mr. Pitt?" whispered one of the girls in a voice that trembled in her excitement. "What did you and Esther find?"

"I can't tell you! I can't tell you now!" almost gasped Malachi Joseph. "Tom," he added turning to the driver, "take Esther back home and the others too; then get Dr. Haskins, and come straight back here as fast as you can come."

"Aren't you coming too, Mr. Pitt?" pleaded one of the girls.

"No! No! Not now! I must stay here."

Malachi Joseph became aware that the perspiration was streaming from his face, and that the excitement under which he was laboring was doubly alarming to the others in the party. "Tom," he said, striving desperately to speak calmly, "you'll be back here in a few minutes, won't you?" As he spoke he glanced keenly at the young driver. The stolid expression had not departed from Tom's face; but there was a deathlike pallor beneath the coat of tan on his cheeks, and the young minister with difficulty repressed the groan that almost rose to his lips. The sight of Tom Sanders' face somehow seemed to confirm his worst fears, and as the stage departed he gazed in sympathy at Esther, who was still sobbing, with her head resting upon Tom's shoulder.

Left to himself, Malachi Joseph strove to collect his thoughts and regain control of himself. The vision of the last time when he had seen Sam flashed upon him. It was when he had chanced upon Tom and Sam in their quarrel behind Deacon Griswold's barn. The animal-like rage of the stage-driver, the face almost inhuman in its expression of ungoverned anger, the contest which had been

interrupted by his own arrival upon the scene, the appearance of the two young men when he had departed, all were vivid again before him in his vision. He blamed himself for having left them until he had been certain all danger of—of—he hardly dared to whisper the word even to himself—was gone.

Then with startling clearness his mind reverted to the brief, almost curt note, which Esther had received announcing Sam's departure and his determination never to return to Acton again. Poor Esther! His eyes filled as he thought of the terrible plight of the girl wife and what in all probability was in store for her.

The unutterable horror of it all came upon him with overwhelming force, and somehow even in the midst of it all he could hear the sharp voice of Mrs. Carter telling him of the dire wickedness of Acton and the need of the community to "repent! and repent! an' yet again I say, repent!" Had he been wrong in his method of appealing to the hearts of the people? Ought he to have followed the advice of the woman who had declared that repentance was the foremost need of the people? Had he made a mistake in not more closely imitating the words and ways of John the Baptist?

The thought of the deadened life of the little

community was again almost startling in its vividness. The basal passions were indeed there, and the lowest notes had been struck. Deacon Griswold's face, with its shining, silvery halo of hair and beard, was emblematic of ashes. Hen Burdette was the type of child-weakness clothed in the body of a man's powerful frame. Tom—ah, poor, blind, undeveloped Tom, with his brutish instincts uncontrolled and his higher nature undeveloped and untouched, even if he *had* a higher nature. And Esther, the vain, thoughtless, tender-hearted girl. Surely from this day forward he would never have occasion to think that only the surface of her nature had been touched.

Acton "dead"? Acton with no possibilities? Acton with no opportunities for service? Here already within the few short months of his labors he had touched the deepest tragedies of human experience. Never again would he complain that his field was circumscribed. His abilities were being tested to the uttermost. And the need of what he supposedly had come to bring was so apparent that Malachi Joseph's heart was throbbing with a new feeling when slowly he turned again to view the horrible, indescribable, nameless *something* in which had once dwelt the light-hearted soul of Sam Howe.

Once more Malachi Joseph stood looking down upon the face of the dead man. It was still recognizable, though loathsome beyond description. Suddenly he started as he was convinced that the marks of some violent blow were visible on one side of the skull. A shudder again swept over him that seemed to confirm his worst fears.

The sound of an approaching wagon roused him from his reverie; and, looking up hastily, he perceived that Tom was returning in the stage, and with him was a man whom he recognized as Dr. Haskins, the sole physician in Acton, and the coroner as well, he recollected.

When the stage halted near the spot, the doctor alighted, and at once approached the place where Malachi Joseph was standing. "Tom tells me you have made a terrible discovery here, Mr. Pitt," he said.

"Yes. Has Tom told you about it?" inquired Malachi Joseph in a low voice. Had Tom known? Had Esther told him? Perhaps he had no need of being told what was hidden beneath the pile of branches and dead leaves. The thought seemed to cause the muscles in the young minister's throat to contract, and for a moment he almost gasped for breath.

"Yes. Tom told me you'd found the body of poor Sam Howe." The doctor spoke in a cool, professional tone, and apparently was not aware of the state of Malachi Joseph's feelings. He at once approached the place where the body was lying, made a hasty examination, and then turning to Tom, said: "Bring a horse-blanket and help me. Let Mr. Pitt look after the team."

"Don't you want me to help?" inquired Malachi Joseph.

"No, no," replied the doctor brusquely. "Tom and I can attend to it."

Malachi Joseph stepped to the front of the horses, though they had imbibed too much of the Acton spirit to be likely to run away, and turned his own head away from the sight which he *knew* was destined never to depart from his vision. Indeed, he closed his eyes for the moment; but still he could *see* the two men lifting *something* that had been wrapped in a heavy blanket, and then move slowly to the rear of the wagon, where their burden was silently deposited. Without a word both men climbed into their seats, and he heard the doctor say, "We're ready, Mr. Pitt."

Without speaking Malachi Joseph climbed into the front seat, and no one spoke on the ride back

to Acton. Dr. Haskins was in charge now, and the minister was not surprised when the physician gave the directions to Tom to proceed at once to his own home. When they arrived there, the burden was deposited in a room in the rear of the doctor's office; and when the task had been completed Dr. Haskins said, "Some one will have to go to tell Sam's father and mother."

"I'll go," said Tom quickly.

For a moment Dr. Haskins seemed to hesitate before he said simply, "All right"; and Tom at once departed.

When Malachi Joseph withdrew, as he did at once, from the doctor's home, he was startled, when he stepped into the street, to perceive that the villagers were already aware of the tragical event. How they had been informed he had no means of knowing; but people were assembled in groups on the straggling street, and their excitement was manifest in their manner. Several times on his way to his home Malachi Joseph was stopped and eagerly questioned, but to all he simply replied that the body of Sam Howe had been found, and then eagerly pressed on toward Mrs. Horne's home.

When he arrived, he was in no way surprised to discover that Mrs. Horne herself was not there; for

he had expected that she would at once go to Esther as soon as she had heard the terrible tale and was informed of her daughter's plight. Deciding to wait till the morrow before he himself would go to the home of Tom and Esther, utterly worn out by the excitement, Malachi Joseph soon flung himself on his bed. The questions that were pressing upon him, suggested by the tragic events of the day, would not leave him, and after a restless night he prepared to face the duties of the coming day.

Mrs. Horne was in a state of nervous collapse, he discovered at the breakfast-table; and again and again she almost framed the question which Malachi Joseph feared she would ask; but every time the words somehow failed the woman, and only the pathetic appeal of her tearful eyes expressed her anxiety.

The excitement in the little village had increased, he perceived when he went down the street to the post-office. There were more groups and more inquiries that he was compelled to meet; but at last he evaded or parried them all, and returned to Esther's home. To his surprise he perceived that her spirits in a measure had returned. Tom, she informed him, had gone as usual to Smithville. Her explanation of the death of Sam was that, contrary

to his written declaration, he must have come back, and perhaps had met with an accident or even taken his own life when he had come within sight of home; and as the explanation had seemed to satisfy her, Malachi Joseph did not even suggest the problem of how a dead body could cover itself with branches and leaves. His heart ached for the girl wife, and he was content to leave her such comfort as she could obtain.

On the following day, when Tom returned from Smithville, he brought with him a sole passenger who apparently had heard of what had occurred in the village, and plied the driver with many questions concerning the tragedy. But Tom, stolid and unresponsive, replied in monosyllables. At best he was not loquacious, and never was given to gossip; and the stranger's information was not largely increased by any information which the driver gave him. For some reason the man remained in the village, frequently riding back and forth to Smithville; and when Malachi Joseph twice perceived the stranger, as he looked out from his own window in the nights when he was unable to sleep, apparently resting against a tree near Tom's home, he instantly concluded that he knew who the man was and why he was in Acton. But, if Tom Sanders

suspected, he betrayed no suspicion by either word or action.

The excitement increased greatly when the coroner's verdict became known, that "Samuel Howe had met his death at the hands of party or parties unknown"; and at the funeral, which occurred on the day following the one when the verdict was rendered, the church was filled as never it had been before. From miles around people thronged to the place; and, when the sealed metal casket was lowered into its final resting-place, there was such an assemblage at the grave as even Deacon Maxsen could not recall.

Anxious beyond his power to express, when Malachi Joseph at last returned to his home, while many of the assembled lingered at the grave, still discussing the tragedy in whispers, he hastily changed his clothing, and eagerly started for Deacon Griswold's barn—a project he had formed in the preceding day, but had hesitated until now about carrying out. Convinced that no one would see him on the way, he slowly drew near the spot. Again he seemed almost to hear the angry words of the two young men. Again he could see the expression on the face of Tom, and a shudder crept over him at the recollection. Once more the vision of what

might have occurred after his departure rose before him, and he thought again of Esther and what she soon might be compelled to endure. He was near the barn now, and he could see within through the half-open door. He was startled as he perceived the stranger in Acton standing on the barn floor, holding a flail in his hand.

"Come in, Mr. Pitt," said the man quietly.

Malachi Joseph obeyed, wondering as he did so how the man knew him.

"This is what the farmers sometimes thresh out their oats with, I take it," suggested the stranger, tapping with one hand the implement which he was holding in the other.

"Yes, sir," replied the young minister, puzzled by the question and the manner alike.

"So I thought. So I thought. It's a strange affair."

"I don't know," responded Malachi Joseph. "I've been familiar with it since I was a boy."

"Is that so? I should have taken you for a city-bred man rather than for one born in the country. So you have been familiar with flails since you were a boy, have you? I wonder, Mr. Pitt, if it has ever occurred to you what a powerful blow could be struck with one of these things."

The man's manner was unchanged apparently, but Malachi Joseph could not repress a shudder as he felt that the stranger's eyes were gazing keenly at him.

"Yes, one could strike a fearful blow—if he knew how," he assented quietly.

"Surely he must know how. You could do it yourself, from your appearance and from what you told me of your own knowledge and experience with these things. I fancy every boy or young man in the country could do it."

"I think they could."

"Please come here, Mr. Pitt. I want you to notice a strange thing. This very flail looks as if it might have been used in that way. See here." As he spoke, the stranger indicated two places where what might have been blood-spots could be seen. "And stranger still," added the man, "I found on this same flail some human hair, which I have carefully preserved in a paper."

For an instant the barn seemed to be whirling before the eyes of Malachi Joseph. His face became colorless, and with staring eyes he gazed into the face of the man before him. "Poor Tom!" he said to himself.

"Yes, one does feel sorry for a young fellow like

that," said the man as if he had heard the unspoken words. "It will go hard with him, I'm afraid."

"Will he be arrested?"

"He has been."

"What?" gasped Malachi Joseph.

"Yes, this afternoon."

"But I saw him at the funeral," persisted the young minister.

"So did I. But he's fixed now, and without bail. The grand jury'll indict him, and no power under heaven can save his neck. Beyond any question he's guilty of the murder of Sam Howe."

A groan broke from Malachi Joseph's lips. His own worst fears were confirmed. He thought of Esther, and at once departed from the barn. On the street he came face to face with Mrs. Carter; and, though he was almost wild-eyed in his eagerness to go to the stricken girl, it was impossible to evade or pass the woman by.

"I'm dreadful disappointed, Mr. Pitt," she began.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I be! It was your chance at th' fun'ral to-day. I told ye Acton was th' wickedest place in the State. Ye can see it yerself now, an' maybe if ye had preached as I told ye to at th' beginnin' this dreadful thing wouldn't 'a' happened t' Sam Howe,

to say nothin' o' Tom. I was hopin' an' prayin' ye'd improve th' occasion."

" 'Improve'? 'Improve,' Mrs. Carter? What was there to 'improve'? It is the most awful experience I've ever been through!"

"I'm not sayin' anything 'bout that. I guess we all know how dreadful 'tis. But what Acton needs is t' repent, an' repent, an' yet again I say unto you, repent. You ought t' improved the occasion to-day, and called the whole con'gation t' repent. Ye won't have such a chance again."

"O Mrs. Carter, I couldn't; I couldn't do it in the way you mean. I was trying to find something to say which would help. What would my words be compared with this—this tragedy? I couldn't add to it if I tried. It has gone home to every one. Poor Sam! Poor little Esther! Yes, and poor Tom! He needs our pity and sympathy too."

" 'Pity'? 'Sympathy'? Hangin's too good for him! Just see what he has done! He lied; he stole away Sam's girl; and then he——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Malachi Joseph hastily. "I'm not upholding him—that is, if he is guilty."

" 'Guilty'? 'Guilty'? Well, I guess th' isn't any question 'bout *that*!"

"You will excuse me, Mrs. Carter, but I must go to see him now, and I must see what can be done for him—and his poor little wife too."

Almost abruptly Malachi Joseph turned away, and so intent was he upon his purpose that even the interview with Mrs. Carter was forgotten when he drew near the house in which Tom Sanders had believed he was to have a home.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO TRIALS

IT required only a glance to enable the young minister to perceive that Tom's house was not occupied; and, summoning all his powers to meet the interview which he dreaded, he walked quickly across the street and entered his boarding-place. To his surprise he discovered that it was Mrs. Horne who was apparently the more overcome by Tom's arrest, while Esther herself was the one to play the rôle of comforter. Dry-eyed, but with an expression of such unspeakable sorrow on her face as to make Malachi Joseph's heart ache as he looked at her, the young wife turned to greet him as he came into the room. In appearance Esther seemed years older than she had been in the preceding week; but she was not utterly cast down, and Malachi Joseph felt a new respect for the girl whom he had previously looked upon as being too frivolous and vain to be capable of a very deep feeling on any subject or toward any person.

"O Mr. Pitt!" exclaimed Esther as she peered

eagerly into the minister's face, "you do not believe Tom is guilty, do you? Tell me you don't."

"He must have every opportunity to prove himself," said Malachi Joseph kindly.

"That's it! That's the very thing I mean!" exclaimed Esther excitedly. "We must mortgage our house. We'll sell the stage and horses! Tom must have the best lawyer we can find. Poor Tom! He just won't talk about it, and I couldn't make him! I'm so afraid he will not do anything to help himself. Maybe he'll talk to you, Mr. Pitt. He always thought so much of you. You'll see him, won't you, Mr. Pitt? You'll help me get a lawyer, won't you? We must clear him! Oh, we must clear him!"

A dry sob broke from the girl's lips that brought tears to the eyes of Malachi Joseph, and he warmly assured Esther that not only would he see Tom, but he would also personally undertake to engage a lawyer and arrange for the necessary money which would be required in the trial by having a mortgage placed upon Tom's property, if such action should become necessary.

It was easy for Malachi Joseph to obtain entrance into Tom's cell, for the accused man was still in the local jail. But in response to the minister's plead-

ings Tom would not utter a word. Dully he gazed at his visitor, as if he did not comprehend what was said. Earnestly Malachi Joseph pleaded with him to tell him what he knew of the tragedy, for there was a vague hope that Tom might somehow have struck the blow in self-defense, and something might at least be attempted in the line of defense by such an explanation. That Tom might be innocent did not even occur to the young minister. But his pleadings and attempted words of comfort were alike disregarded; and, when Malachi Joseph departed, he had not received even so much as a sign that his visit had been welcome to the prisoner.

Quickly the indictment of Thomas Sanders for the murder of Samuel Howe followed; and then the prisoner was transferred to the county jail. Arrangements were made for the trial, and in the intervening weeks Malachi Joseph was so busy that he begrudged even the time that was necessary for eating and sleeping. The most famous lawyer in the region was engaged to defend the prisoner, and the young minister spent much of his time in consultation with the veteran; but, though his manner when he met Esther and her mother was unchanged, it was noticeable that his confidence in the acquittal of the accused man did not increase. He marveled

at Esther's quiet self-possession, which became even more manifest with the passing of the days; and his respect for the girl-wife rose as his sympathy steadily deepened for her. She was quiet in her manner, regular and earnest in her attendance at the services of the church, and apparently oblivious to the excitement that prevailed among the Acton people. And Acton, however dead it may have formerly appeared to Malachi Joseph, was certainly aroused now.

His labors among his people, his efforts with the boys and girls, and the services at Smithville, were still maintained. In the latter place there was a specially marked response, though in all his tasks Malachi Joseph now found an apparently deeper purpose and willingness to aid. Whether or not it was due to the tragedy and the approaching trial he could not determine; but the fact was evident, and he labored with renewed zeal.

Like the other people in the village, he too was deeply moved as the day of the trial came near. He had regularly visited Tom every week, but not a word had the prisoner spoken to him. The sole sign that he had given that he even heard what Malachi Joseph was saying came one time when the minister, urging him to tell exactly what had taken

place at the barn, quoted Esther as joining in his plea. Then a stifled sob broke forth from the man's lips; but his eyes were dry, and not a word would he speak.

At last the never-to-be-forgotten day of the trial arrived. The court-room was crowded, and the morbid interest among the spectators seemed to be divided between the prisoner and the girl-wife, who was also present, heavily veiled.

With the precision of a machine the district attorney drew forth from his witnesses the facts that seemed every one to fall into its place in forging the chain by which the accused man was bound. The rivalry of the two young men for Esther's favor, the threats which Tom had been heard to make, even the accident which had befallen Sam when the church was being painted, were brought out. Then by the evidence of Malachi Joseph himself, a most unwilling witness, the quarrel behind Deacon Griswold's barn was described, Sam's sudden disappearance, the letter which Esther had received announcing his determination never to return to Acton, the presentation of other handwriting to show that the letter in question must have been written by Tom himself, the startling affidavit of the postmaster of the little town in Michigan from

which the letter had been sent that he had received the letter in question enclosed in another requesting him to post it, the submitting of the request written in the same handwriting, the discovery of the ghastly body of the dead man, were all brought out; and then came the climax in the exhibition of the flail with its blood-stains and the grewsome sight of the hair which the detective had found upon it. The motive for the crime, the steps that led to it, and the final quarrel and blow were all dwelt upon with evidently telling effect by the district attorney in his calm, forceful address to the jury.

For the defense, Tom's quiet life (Malachi Joseph was also a witness for the defense), the failure at best to present more than what might be termed circumstantial evidence, the absence of any direct proof that the accused had committed the crime, his right to be considered innocent until direct proof had been produced that he was guilty—all these were emphasized; but with a sinking heart Malachi Joseph perceived as the trial wore on that the defense was lame indeed.

When the lawyer for the prisoner began his address to the jury, Malachi Joseph also perceived that the man was exerting himself to the utmost to appeal to the sympathies of the men before him rather

than to base his claim for an acquittal upon the innocence of Tom Sanders. He pictured the early life of Tom, his lonely boyhood, his love for Esther, the deep, absorbing passion of his life, the happiness in the new home, the despair that had followed.

Tears streamed down the faces of the jurymen, and sobs could be heard from every part of the crowded room as the man proceeded. It was oratory, impassioned, almost compelling; it was magnificent, Malachi Joseph acknowledged to himself, as he too wiped the tears from his eyes; but it was not law, and it was not in accord with the facts of the case.

And all this became evident when the judge calmly, almost coldly, charged the jury. Only an hour had elapsed after the jury had retired when the crowd, which had meanwhile increased rather than scattered, with bated breath and staring eyes watched the twelve silent men as they filed back to their places in the box. Then, in response to the query of the judge the foreman, with colorless face and trembling voice, in the midst of the silence so intense that it seemed to rest like a heavy weight upon all that were in the room, pronounced the words:

“Guilty of manslaughter in the first degree.”

The assembly drew in its breath like a great sob; and then suddenly there came a wild, despairing cry from the prisoner, who had risen, and was staring at the place where his young wife was seated beside her mother. "O Esther! Esther! Have mercy upon me! Mercy! Mercy!"

For a moment the wretched prisoner staggered and swayed like a drunken man, and the sound of sobs rose from all parts of the court-room. The condemned man was assisted to stand by the sheriff and his deputy, and then with bowed head received his sentence, which the judge, now visibly affected also, pronounced.

"State prison for life!"

With face once more stolid the prisoner was led away, and with a sigh the audience began to disperse. Esther, trembling but quiet, withdrew with her mother, while Malachi Joseph remained to speak to the lawyer that had defended Tom. In response to his query as to the possibility of an appeal the man said quietly, but decidedly: "Not a particle of use. If Tom had given me a show for a plea of self-defense, or any explanation at all, I might have gotten him off. I did my best, but it was of no use. I just managed to save his neck, and that's all. The man was guilty. He knows it, and so does every

one. A dozen trials wouldn't change the verdict." Convinced of the truth that the man had spoken, Malachi Joseph turned away, and with aching heart sought out Esther and her mother, and with them returned to Acton.

As the weeks passed, his surprise at the strength which the worse than widowed girl displayed, increased. She seldom smiled, but never complained; and the expression on her face soon settled into one of patient suffering. Her activities in the church increased, and the young minister was becoming convinced that the interest of the people warranted the scheme he had planned of attempting a more direct work for, as well as in, the community itself.

It was now December, and the snow lay more than two feet deep over the land. It was bitterly cold too; but the increase in the attendance at the services of the church, the increasing feeling of confidence in himself, which he was persuaded was in the hearts of the people, the sober effect that remained after the excitement attending the tragedy of Sam Howe's death and Tom's conviction, all convinced him that the time for actively aggressive work was at hand.

And then one night he was aroused by the wild, hoarse cry of "Fire! Fire!" Leaping from his

bed and hastily donning his clothing, Malachi Joseph rushed from the house into the street to behold the flames leaping from the roof of the church. For a moment it seemed to him as if every hope was gone, the labor of all the months had been in vain. Rousing himself quickly, he joined the crowd that had already assembled in the yard in front of the meeting-house. Upon the roof he could see Hen Burdette pouring water from the pails that were hauled up to him by willing hands. Desperately the men labored; but it was soon seen that the church could not be saved, and then they all turned their efforts to the saving of the near-by houses, several of which were already in peril from the flying sparks that had fallen upon their roofs.

Suddenly every one stopped as a wild cry went up, "Hen's fallen!"

Regardless of the peril, a half-dozen men darted into the building, and soon returned with the unconscious man in their arms, their own clothing smoking and their eyebrows singed by the scorching heat.

"His legs is broke," explained one of the rescuers huskily. "A stick o' timber fell on 'em."

It was Malachi Joseph who assisted as one of the four to carry Hen to his home; and when, amidst

the shrieks and cries of his family, the man was placed tenderly on a bed, and Dr. Haskins had been summoned, all four ran swiftly back to the raging fire.

All night long the men fought desperately and, when the dawn appeared, the fires had been subdued, but the church and three dwelling-houses were in ruins.

Almost exhausted, sick at heart, Malachi Joseph turned at last toward the home of Mrs. Horne. Failure and despair were plainly stamped upon his face; but, as he entered the yard, he came face to face with Aunt Miriam, her eyes shining and her enthusiasm apparently as keen as ever it had been.

"O Aunt Miriam," he said dejectedly, "isn't it too bad? All the work of the year has gone up in smoke!"

"My dear boy," she replied gently, "I'm sorry for the people that lost their houses, but I'm glad the Lord took our meeting-house away."

"'Glad'?" "Glad," Aunt Miriam? I don't understand. We'd got it painted and repaired, and were just ready to begin——"

"That's it, my boy; that's just it. All your work as you have told us, is just for preparation. The people are interested as they haven't been in years,

an' I believe are ready to work. An' now they've *got* to work! They've just got to! An' they will. The Lord's hand is in it all. You'll see such a response here as will do your soul good. Only have faith, and be faithful."

For an instant Malachi Joseph gazed into her eyes, and then a light seemed to flash upon his grimy face. "I believe you are right. I know you are, Aunt Miriam!" he said enthusiastically.

"The Lord will bless. Don't you be afraid to trust him. Now, go into the house, or you'll get cold."

Malachi Joseph's enthusiasm seemed to increase as the hours passed. Only two days remained before Sunday, and he at once secured the school-house for the coming service. It was easy to extend the notice, and it was spread throughout the region to such an extent that on Sunday morning he faced such an assembly as he had never before addressed in Acton.

Almost carried away by his enthusiasm he referred to his plans and labors, and the response they had met, and then presented his plea for a new building. Something would be received from the insurance adjuster, who was expected on the morrow; something also certainly would come from the

Home Mission Society; but most of all and first of all they must show their own desires and earnestness. Questions were asked and answered, and then came the responses. Outsiders gave. There were offers of labor, timber, and stone; and even Mrs. Carter made a subscription with enthusiasm. When the congregation dispersed, Malachi Joseph, enthusiastic over the enthusiasm of the people, stopped for a moment to say to Aunt Miriam, "Now I know it's coming."

"Yes, my boy. The Lord is not slack in livin' up to his promises."

"We've just begun."

"So we have. Acton will look up now, and not look all the while behind her."

On the morrow Malachi Joseph called upon Hen Burdette. Propped up in bed, his hands bandaged, great scars on his cheeks, there yet seemed to be shining from his face something of the light the young preacher had seen in Aunt Miriam's eyes. His face clouded, however, as Hen said: "The doctor says I'll never walk again, Mr. Pitt. My legs are smashed too bad."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! We hope——"

"That's what I'm doin'. I'm hopin' as I never did afore. Now I *know* I'll never go near Palmer's

again, and the man smiled as he spoke. "I shan't have t' bother you no more, Mr. Pitt. I'm afraid I was worse'n a houn' dog taggin' at your heels."

"Not a bit, Mr. Burdette," said Malachi Joseph softly.

"I'm sorry I sha'n't be able t' help 'long th' new church."

"You have; you are helping."

"Me helpin'? I don't see jest how."

"You are, just the same. You help me. You help us all."

"I don't see how." But the man's face was aglow when Malachi Joseph departed.

The young minister at once returned to Mrs. Horne's, and at the door he met Esther just as she was coming out.

"There's a man here to see you, Mr. Pitt," she said. "He's from the insurance company."

"The adjuster!" said Malachi Joseph as he hastily entered the room. For a moment he stared at the man that rose to meet him; and then with a laugh he stretched out his hand, and said: "Why, Dan! Dan Turnbull! I had never a thought of seeing you here."

"Nor I of seeing you, Mal," laughed Dan as he returned the greeting. "Then you are the young

minister here—are you?—that I hear all the people talking about.”

“Do they? I didn’t know it. I trust it’s not all bad they say.”

“I should say not! Come over to the hotel, Mal. I want you to see my wife. You remember Hannah?”

For a moment the face of Malachi Joseph was as white as the drifted snow outside the house. “Remember”? “Remember Hannah?” It had been the source of his deepest sorrow that he could not forget. Her face had been before him when he had been visiting the sick or preparing his sermons. Her clear brown eyes had smiled their approval, or had mildly rebuked him when he had been about to speak the hasty word. His hunger for her presence had grown until his sorrow at times had been, as he thought, almost more than he could bear. The longing in his heart would not be stilled, though he had striven desperately to think of her as belonging to another. Not a word had his mother written of her in her letters, and he had not even heard that Dan was married. And now she was here, but not his. Could he meet her? Would his self-control give way in her presence? And yet he must meet her, he wildly assured himself.

Not to do so would be to play the part of a churl, and besides would only increase his burden. Yes, he must go; and resolutely he turned again to face his boyhood friend.

"Yes, I'll go. I did not know you were married, Dan," he said.

"Well, I am," laughed Dan. "I'm one of the adjusters now, and can afford a home. Come on, Mal, we'll go down at once. I told her I'd bring you."

"Don't you think we'd better stop first and look over the—the ruins?" Malachi Joseph feebly suggested.

"Not a bit! I've done that already. When you bring on your policy, we'll fix it all up in five minutes. I'm one of the adjusters, I tell you; and what I report will go."

"All right," responded Malachi Joseph as he at once prepared to accompany Dan on what he felt was destined to be one of the severest trials of his life.

The young minister was strangely silent as they walked down the street; but Dan apparently was unmindful, for his own powers of conversation were limitless. Malachi Joseph was trembling in spite of his self-control when they entered the hotel; but

his self-possession was in part, at least, restored when Dan, who had left him in the parlor, returned with his wife.

"Here we are, Mal," he called cheerily as they entered the room. "I don't think I need to introduce you; but this is Mrs. Turnbull, the best little wife in this land or any other."

Malachi Joseph, whose eyes had been upon the floor, looked up, and stared blankly at the woman who was smiling upon him. For a moment he was speechless; then the blood surged to his face as he stammered, "Why—why—I thought you married Hannah Brown."

"'Hannah Brown'?" laughed Dan delightedly. "Well, I guess not! She's as good a girl as ever lived in Turnerville—that is, except one"; and he turned and looked with pride at the young woman by his side. "But not for me. Hannah Goodwin that was, and Hannah Goodwin Turnbull that is, is the one for me."

The sudden cordiality of Malachi Joseph, the warmth of his congratulations, his laughter that was continuous, were, it may be, somewhat surprising to his friends; but his enthusiasm was but a counterpart of their own, and so aroused no comment.

For an hour Malachi Joseph remained at the ho-

tel; and then as he arose to take his departure, he said eagerly: "When are you going back, Dan?"

"To-night; but we're going to stop at Turnerville on the way."

"Then I'll go with you. I have just decided that I must go too. You see, now that I have the insurance matters here adjusted, I must go on to see the Home Mission Society; and I'd like to stop in Turnerville. You see I haven't seen my mother for a long time, and—and——" Malachi Joseph stopped in some confusion as he perceived a demure little smile on the face of Dan's wife. It was marvelously comforting to him, however; and not even Dan's enthusiasm over the prospect of his friend's company on the journey served to divert the feeling.

The young minister's elation when he went up the street was apparently contagious. People greeted him warmly, and he responded in kind. The very fields, snow-clad and glistening, seemed to reflect the joy of his own heart. It was good to be alive. His work was prosperous, and even the Home Mission Society must soon see that the decadent churches, where the "native Americans" lived, were fields full of promise. At the post-office he found a letter in his box from Doctor Diggs. Mala-

chi Joseph even laughed aloud as he recalled the stern, forbidding features of the "grand old man," for so he now called him in common with most of the Pilgrim graduates; and then he hastily opened and read the letter.

MY DEAR PITT: I have followed your course closely. I thank God for what my ears have heard. You have found yourself, my dear fellow; and in finding that I know you have found your way and work in Him who is "our friend, our brother, and our Lord." I want you soon to come back and tell the boys about your work. It will do them good. They need it, and they will respond, too. There is singing in my heart because I know there is a new song in your soul. I always loved you almost as if you had been my own son in the flesh. I heartily wish you were. God bless you in your field and work, in your life—and I hope soon to say in "your home."

Sincerely,

T. DIGGS.

Malachi Joseph's eyes were light with an expression of unusual tenderness when he lifted them from the page; and, as he hastened homeward to prepare for his journey, those who chanced to meet and greet him had no question as to the "new song in his soul." Something besides "ashes" had been found in the decadent little village of Acton; and the confidence of the young minister in what the

coming years held in store for him, in the field which he declared to himself he would not exchange for any other in the land, was clear and strong. His problems had not been few nor his burden light, but he had found the "yoke" which made them easy. And the new hope which had flooded his soul with light made his life and his life-work glow as the snow-clad fields about Acton glistened beneath the brightness of the winter sun. Henceforth he was to share his joys and sorrows with one who could comfort and inspire. If in paradise it was "not good for man to be alone," surely in Acton that primal law was even stronger. And Malachi Joseph Pitt was prepared to obey.

CHAPTER XV

FELLOW-TRAVELERS

HEAVY clouds were low in the sky and the air was full of the feeling of snow when Malachi Joseph hastened on his way back from the hotel to the home of Mrs. Horne. The young minister, however, was positive that never before had Acton been so bright and shining as it was that day. The faces of the people he met on the street all appeared to reflect the brightness, and even the blackened ruins of the meeting-house, covered as they now were with a coating of ice and snow, were shining as if they too had shared in the promise of better things to come.

With a bound Malachi Joseph darted up the steps of the piazza in front of the house which for months now had been his home, and as he entered the room where Esther and her mother were standing both turned in surprise to look at his eager face. For a moment the pathos in the expression of Esther's face struck Malachi Joseph almost like a blow as he realized that the contrast between his

own enthusiasm and the sorrow in the worse than widowed girl-wife's heart must be striking. Restraining his eagerness, Malachi Joseph said quietly, "I've been talking with the insurance adjuster. We have the matter practically settled and the insurance company is going to do more than the fair thing by us. We'll have a new building before the snow comes next winter! The adjuster is an old friend of mine. He used to live in Turnerville, and so did his wife," he added quickly. "She is a fine girl. I have known her for years."

"I am glad," said Esther simply.

"So am I," responded Malachi Joseph. "Dan and his wife are going to stop at Turnerville and—and I think I'll go with them. You see I ought to see the officials of the Home Mission Society, and I can take a day or two to stop off at Turnerville and I'll have a chance to see my mother."

There was no special reason why Malachi Joseph's face should have suddenly flushed as it did, for surely it was no more than natural that after his long absence he should be eager to see his mother again. Apparently Mrs. Horne was not aware of any other motive in the young minister's unexpected departure from Acton, but he himself was suddenly aware that Esther was gazing shrewdly

at him and that a trace of a smile could be seen in the corners of her mouth.

"When do you go?" inquired Mrs. Horne.

"To-night—this afternoon," said Malachi Joseph. "I shall have to be quick too, if I—catch my train at Smithville." He had almost said "get the stage," but checked himself just in time. He noticed, however, that Esther's face quickly paled and he knew that she understood, though not a word had been spoken. The stage between Acton and Smithville still made its regular trips, though Sam Pattison had succeeded Tom Sanders as driver.

"Do you expect to be back by Sunday?" inquired Mrs. Horne.

"No; to-day is Wednesday and I don't think I can possibly do all I plan and be back in Acton by that time." Again Malachi Joseph was aware of a demure expression in Esther's eyes and he laughed in response in spite of his endeavor to be calm. "I must go up to my room and do my packing and then I'll have just time enough to see Deacon Maxsen and explain to him that he will have to take charge of the services on Sunday."

"I'll see the deacon for you," suggested Esther quietly.

"Thank you," responded Malachi Joseph as he

departed from the room. "I shall take you at your word if I don't have time to see him myself."

Despite his haste, when he was alone in his room Malachi Joseph stood for a moment in silence as he looked about him. How different everything appeared from what it had when he had first claimed the room as his own. The same impossible scene at Bethany was still hanging upon the wall, the pattern of the carpet was as quaint as when first he had seen it, Esther's framed handiwork still assured him that "faith giveth the victory"; but somehow everything was different now. What had caused the change? Even now Malachi Joseph was not fully aware that the real change was in himself. He had come to Acton thinking of what he himself would do. Now his supreme thought was of the work which was to be done. And what an opportunity lay before him! In the brief time of his life in Acton already he had heard the appeals of life in almost every form. The saintly face of Aunt Miriam comforted him and banished the wasp-like image of Mrs. Carter. The light he had seen in the eyes of poor, helpless Hen Burdette softened the recollection of the speechless despair he had last seen on the face of Tom when he had been carried away by the sheriff to serve his endless sentence in

the State prison. The qualities of unlooked-for strength which Esther, whom at first he had thought to be altogether frivolous and vain, had displayed were not the only signs of life to be seen in the village. It was not the life of Acton which had been at fault, but his vision of it, Malachi Joseph assured himself eagerly. Already the promise was fulfilling itself, and with the rebuilding of the church and the response of the people to his plans and pleas—a response even now to be seen on every side—there were great things in store. He could afford to work and be patient. And then for a moment even the appeal of Acton became dim as the thought of Hannah once more swept over him. What an inspiration her presence would be. And her interest in the people of Acton and in his labors would be as keen as his own.

For the first time in the life of Malachi Joseph a sudden sense of his own unworthiness swept over him. Who was he to claim Hannah as his own? Not a word had he received from her since his coming to Acton, and for some unexplained reason his mother had not once referred to her in the weekly letter she had written. What reason had he for believing that Hannah still cared for him? Perhaps it was too late. Some one else——

The suggestion was too maddening even to be completed, and instantly Malachi Joseph turned to his task of packing the few articles of clothing that were necessary for his journey. Self-effacement apparently had given place to a feeling of determination. He would not lose; he must not, he could not, he assured himself repeatedly. So eager and excited was the young minister that in a brief time he was standing in the room below, his "grip" in his hand and was saying good-by to his friends.

"Here, Mr. Pitt. I have a box of luncheon for you," said Esther. "Take it. You may need it, for one can never tell what may happen on our railroad in the winter," she added as Malachi Joseph at first seemed about to decline.

"Thank you," he said instead, as he took the box. "And you will see Deacon Maxsen for me and explain just how it was that I started so—so unexpectedly for home? I must see the Home Mission Society people."

"Yes, Mr. Pitt; I'll tell him all about it. At least, I'll tell him all I know. And I wish you success," she added as she looked into the eyes of Malachi Joseph with an expression of such friendliness and interest that the young minister for an instant was

confused and wondered if he had in any way let her see what was in his heart.

"Good-by," he called as he started toward the street.

"Good-by. Good-by, Mr. Pitt," called Mrs. Horne and Esther. "Don't be gone too long, and I hope you'll have a good time and be successful," said the latter as she lingered on the piazza for a moment after her mother re-entered the house.

Malachi Joseph walked swiftly down the street toward the hotel and when he entered he discovered Dan seated in the office busily reading a paper. He responded cordially to his friend's greeting as he arose to meet him, and then he laughed as he said, "You're certainly on time, Mal. The stage doesn't leave for an hour yet."

"Doesn't it?" responded Malachi Joseph innocently. "Well, better be ahead of time than behind. I believe in being punctual."

"Mal, I don't see but that you are the same old fellow you used to be," laughed Dan. "If I'm not mistaken you never liked to wait for anything. Do you remember the time when we went fishing in Potter's Creek? You were in such a hurry to be off that morning that we left our dinner behind us. Remember that?"

"Yes," laughed Malachi Joseph. "But we caught our fish——"

"But what were fish compared to our dinner?" responded Dan.

"It was fish we went after."

"And not the dinner? What kind of fish are you after this trip?"

"I've looked out for the dinner this time, any way," laughed Malachi Joseph as he held up to view the box which Esther had given him. In spite of his efforts to ignore the manner of his friend he was aware that he was not entirely successful. What was it, he wondered, that made Dan as well as Esther suspect that it was more than a visit at his mother's and an interview with certain officials which was the cause of his sudden departure from Acton?

He was relieved when Dan resumed his natural manner and the two friends conversed of their boyhood days and each related some of the experiences he had had since he had entered upon his career. At last Mrs. Dan appeared just as the stage arrived in front of the hotel and in a brief time all three were speeding toward Smithville. Dan had already telegraphed to Granby Junction, fifteen miles beyond Smithville, for reservations in the sleeping-

car, and when the party arrived there they at once entered the waiting train and secured the places reserved for them. It was snowing hard by this time and Dan, who prided himself upon his experience as a traveler, declared that the storm was likely to make them lose time. He laughed as his friend betrayed his disappointment, but Malachi Joseph, before he could respond, turned sharply as some one touched him upon the shoulder.

"Why, Mr. Burt!" he exclaimed as he discovered the former chairman of the pulpit committee of the church at Serena. "I never thought to see you here."

"I come up into this part of the country twice a year to buy lumber. I get off at the second station beyond. I'd like to have you sit here with me a spell if your friends don't mind."

Malachi Joseph presented Dan and his wife, and then excusing himself at once took a seat beside the matter-of-fact, energetic man from Serena.

"I am usually in the habit of coming straight to the point, Mr. Pitt," began Mr. Burt sharply. "That man we called to Serena is a flat failure."

"Is he? I am sorry to hear that," replied Malachi Joseph quietly.

"That's what he is. He didn't have but two ser-

mons and he got them both off that Sunday I went down to Monroe. Can't fill the bill for us. He's got to go, and as the Scriptures say, 'The time of his departure is at hand.'"

The young minister was aware that his pulse was beating more rapidly, for it was impossible not to perceive what the object in Mr. Burt's brusque words was.

"I've been thinking of you," continued Mr. Burt. "Tell me, where are you and what are you doing?"

"I'm pastor of the church at Acton."

"'Acton'! You mean that little hole in the ground three miles from the railroad, back of Smithville?"

The start of surprise which Mr. Burt gave was almost laughable, but Malachi Joseph was quiet as he responded, "That is the place, Mr. Burt, though some of the people there might perhaps resent your description of it. It is far from being 'a hole in the ground.'"

"Hum. Was that the other call you had—the one you said you had when I was talking to you in Mr. Bingham's house in Monroe?"

"Yes, sir." Malachi Joseph's face flushed crimson at the recollection of his foolish words at the time to which his companion referred. He had grown vastly since then.

"Is *that* the best you could do?" demanded Mr. Burt.

"That was what I did. Yes, sir. I am sure that was the best I could do."

"H-m-m. Let me see; did you marry that Bingham girl?"

"No, sir." There was a feeling of anger now in Malachi Joseph's heart that made even the recollections of the days to which Mr. Burt so glibly referred seem less confusing. What right had the man to question him as he was doing? For an instant the young minister was tempted to retort by asking his seat-mate questions as personal as those which he himself was answering; but it was not quite the same Malachi Joseph seated on the train as the one who so eagerly had listened to the chairman's words in Mr. Bingham's house.

"H-m-m," Mr. Burt was saying. "Turned you down, did she, when she found you didn't get the call to Serena?"

"Mr. Burt," began Malachi Joseph sitting instantly erect.

"There!" interrupted the man. "I didn't mean anything. Maybe it isn't too late yet. The pulpit in our church will be vacant pretty quick; it's been empty a long time—and if you'd like to have me,

I'll put your name before the committee. Of course it will be a bit harder now than it would if you were just graduating or had a better church than the one in Acton."

"Thank you, Mr. Burt," said Malachi Joseph so quietly that the man was unaware of the intensity in the words. "I do not care even to think of leaving Acton, not even if the church at Serena should——"

Mr. Burt sat up and for a moment stared blankly at his seat-mate.

"What do you mean?" he demanded at last. "Don't you mean to make a success? Don't you want to make yourself felt in this world?"

"How am I to do that?"

"Get the biggest thing you can."

"What for?"

"'What for?' Why so that you'll get a big salary."

"What for?"

"So you'll save money and——"

"What for?" persisted Malachi Joseph quietly.

"Why, so you'll *have* it, and can get——"

"What for?"

"Don't you want to make a name for yourself?"

"What for?" asked Malachi Joseph laughingly."

"You don't mean to tell me you've given up all your ambition?" declared Mr. Burt. "Why, you talk as if Acton already had got into your blood. There isn't a live man in the town as I recollect, and you mustn't for your own sake just settle down like that. You talk like an old man now."

"Do I look the part?" laughed Malachi Joseph.

"No, to be honest, you don't. You look better and more like a man than you did in Monroe. I don't mind telling you that right to your face: What I can't understand is, though, what you mean by this talk of yours. I don't believe much in a colt that doesn't have to be broken. I confess I don't like to hear a young man talk as if he had already given up and was ready to quit."

"'Give up,' Mr. Burt," said Malachi Joseph quickly. "That's the last thought in my mind. I'm just getting hold. I used to think the first duty of a man was to make the most of himself. I wanted to make a name and all that."

"That's right!" interrupted Mr. Burt sharply.

"Now listen, Mr. Burt. I don't know just how to say it, but I have come to see that it's the work that comes first. Now let me tell you about the work at Acton." X

In eager tones Malachi Joseph, although he could

not himself understand how it was that he was speaking as he did, told Mr. Burt of the conditions he had found at Acton, the indifference, the "ashes" of life, as he had once believed. Then he related some of his personal experiences with such men as Hen Burdette; he told of the saintly Aunt Miriam, lightly related some of the waspish Mrs. Carter's sayings, and his voice thrilled as he told of the tragedy in which he himself as well as the parties more immediately concerned had suffered keenly. Then he told of the burning of the church edifice, the trials that had come, the work that was being done in Smithville and the hopeful outlook and of his own purpose on his present journey to confer with the officers of the Home Mission Society. "Yes, sir, Mr. Burt, I have learned one thing anyway. Do you suppose Columbus was thinking of making a name for himself? Not a bit. He was just determined to find that land across the sea. Do you believe George Washington was trying to make himself famous? No, sir. What he was trying to do was to set free these colonies. Do you think Judson was working for a reputation? Why, the only thought in his mind was of the work he was trying to do. Don't think," he added lightly, "that I'm trying in any way to draw a comparison

between any of these men and my own little task. But, Mr. Burt, I tell you I am just full of the thought of that which can be done in Acton and in hundreds of such little villages. Dead? Why, man, there is the greatest chance in all the world right there. What business have I or has any one to stop and think about making a name for himself or getting a great place when there is all this to be done? I tell you, Mr. Burt, I am so full of the thought of what can be done in Acton and what must be done too, that I haven't even time to think of anything else. Oh, I'm not posing as a saint," Malachi Joseph added. "It isn't anything that concerns me personally. I feel just as any one would, Mr. Burt, just as you would yourself if you stayed in Acton three weeks, that to wake the people up and open their eyes to what makes life worth living, to start the boys and girls right, to try to comfort the sorrowing and do something for the man who is down—why, all this and more is what I have to face. Work? Why, Mr. Burt, I have all I can do and I don't think I'm a laggard either. And I can tell you another thing, that all this makes life worth the living! A man gets out of his religion just about what he puts into it, the same as he does in business."

Malachi Joseph was speaking so eagerly that he was hardly aware how interested the man beside him was.

"You're going to rebuild now?" inquired Mr. Burt quietly.

"Yes, sir."

"I want to make a contribution." And Mr. Burt drew forth his check-book and began to write.

"No, no. Please, Mr. Burt, don't do it. I don't want you to."

"Why not?"

"Because I want the church to do this thing. The Home Mission Society has an equity in the property any way, so I am willing they should help; but give your money to the society. Don't, don't do it for the church. I have an idea that no church ought to beg, nor ought it to build better than it can afford."

"I never preached a sermon in my life," said Mr. Burt as he thrust the book back into his pocket.

"I'm sure I should make sad work of it; but I can give you a text."

"I shall be very glad to have it," said Malachi Joseph quietly, wondering what kind of a text the intensely practical man would suggest.

"Young man, I have been glad to hear what you

have said to me. It makes me believe in men—in you anyway. You have struck the right vein, as sure as you're alive. If you only keep at it you'll strike oil or gold."

"What was the text?"

"I don't know that I can quote it exactly, but it's to the effect that the man who loses sight of himself is the one that finds himself. Why, man, that's the very subject you spoke about in your graduating oration!"

X X

"Did I?" said Malachi Joseph thoughtfully. "I don't really recall just what I said, but——"

"It's true. It's the simple, practical truth. Until a man is so wrapped up in his work that he doesn't stop to think of himself he'll never be worth a copper cent, I don't care whether he's digging ditches or preaching sermons. When a man comes into the Serena pulpit and begins to talk as if he knew he had a mighty fine sermon, I know then that he's a light-weight. He hasn't got his eyes open any more than a three-days'-old kitten. But when a man comes who has something to say about something which he himself really believes is the most important thing in the whole world, then I know I'm listening to the real thing. I sit up and take notice. I may not believe a word he says, but

I know he believes every word of it and it's that kind of a man that does me good——”

Mr. Burt did not complete the sentence, for the train suddenly came to a standstill. Although neither of the two men had been aware of it the speed of the train had slackened, and frequently the cars had stopped.

At this moment one of the trainmen entered, his uniform almost hidden from sight by the snow that covered it, and said, “We're stalled. It's snowing harder than I ever saw it in my life. We'll be lucky if we are out of this in two days.”

CHAPTER XVI

THROUGH THE SNOW

MORE than two days elapsed before the train was pulled out slowly from the place where it had been fast in the snow. The storm proved to be one of the worst ever experienced in the region, which was saying much, for the country was famous for its falls of snow, and at Acton Malachi Joseph had frequently been told how the fences were buried from sight by Thanksgiving time and the rails did not appear again until April. The wind now whirled the falling crystals and beat against the windows of the car until nothing could be seen as the passengers peered forth from the frost-covered windows except a mass of white that seemed to rise like mountains on every side.

The disappointment of the people on the train, vocal and unrestrained at first, soon gave place to an apprehension that was keen when the problem of securing food and fuel became vital, as it soon did. Esther Sanders' ample box of provisions was speedily disposed of among the women and children



in the car, but on the second day, when the storm had abated and still no signs of relief were discovered, Malachi Joseph came to his friend Dan and said, "How is it, Dan? Do you feel like going with me to see if there is a farmhouse anywhere near here?"

"Yes, sir! You may count on me, Mal," responded Dan quickly. "It won't be the first time we have plowed our way through the snow together, will it? It will be almost as good as being back at Turnerville and making believe we are boys again."

"Not quite," responded Malachi Joseph, whose disappointment, despite his apparent indifference, was too keen to be expressed in words. "All right, Dan. I'll be back in a few minutes. I want first to see some of the trainmen and find out if they'll make a search for fence rails. Something will have to be done to keep the people here warm or there'll be suffering—or worse."

In a few minutes Malachi Joseph returned with the assurance that volunteers had been found to search for fuel, and then he and his friend at once prepared to set forth on their own perilous expedition. The bottoms of their trousers were bound tightly about their ankles, thick mittens were con-

tributed by some of the passengers and caps were to be worn which were tied to their heads by mufflers that were wrapped about their ears and covered their faces, leaving only their eyes and noses to be seen.

"Suppose the train leaves before you come back, Dan?" called his young wife as the two were at last equipped. "What shall I do?"

"Take care of yourself, Hannah, that's all," responded Dan as he kissed her fondly. "'Twon't be the first time you have had to do that. There isn't much chance of your leaving before we come back, though. Good-by."

The passengers all crowded about the windows to watch the two young men as they plunged into the snow which came almost to their shoulders. By great efforts Malachi Joseph and Dan gained the border of the near-by woods and as they disappeared from sight the passengers resumed their places in the car and Mr. Burt said soberly:

"That's almost foolhardy! They don't know whether there's a house within ten miles of this spot or not. It would be better for us all to go hungry for a day or two than for two such young fellows as they are to run such a risk. I don't like it myself! I don't like it a little bit!"

The white face of Dan Turnbull's wife gazing at him with startled eyes caused Mr. Burt to change his manner instantly and say, "They'll do it! You needn't worry about them! I think it's too much for them to do, that's all. We would get along somehow."

"I am glad they didn't stop to think of themselves. There are children on the cars whose very lives may depend on what Dan and Malachi Joseph may do," said Dan's wife quietly.

For a moment Mr. Burt looked at the young woman without replying, and then he turned abruptly away as he hastened to join the men who were searching for fuel.

Meanwhile Malachi Joseph and Dan were slowly forging their way toward the road, which some one had declared was distant about a half-mile and running parallel with the railroad itself. The snow was soft and frequently one of the two almost disappeared from sight as he fell into the depths of some concealed ditch or hole. Sometimes it became necessary for the one to aid the other by extending a helping hand, and several times it came to pass that both together were floundering in a snow-bank that completely buried them from sight. At last they found themselves in what manifestly was

a road, although the drifts were high and not a sign of a human habitation was to be seen.

"Mal," panted Dan as they halted for a moment, "don't you think it would be better if you went up the road and I went down? We haven't the least idea where the nearest farmhouse is and our chances will be better if we separate. We can both come back here and it won't do any harm if we both happen to find something."

"No," responded Malachi Joseph. "Our only hope is in keeping together."

"We may have to go miles, Mal," suggested Dan.

"Then we'll go, that's all. But we'll hope we sha'n't have to."

Despite his weariness Dan gazed for a moment at his friend without speaking. Was this the "Mal" he had known as a boy? What had wrought the change? Apparently there was the same boyish twinkle to be seen in the eyes of the snow-covered man before him that he had known years before, but in former years few had ever known "Mal" Pitt to trouble himself very much for others, and the man now before him apparently was unmindful of everything except of bringing aid to the people that were suffering on the stalled train.

Resolutely the two young men resumed their diffi-

cult task, making slow progress as they forced their way forward. The cold was intense, but neither was aware of it, so violent were the exertions they were making. Not a word of complaint was heard, although both were aware that the power of human endurance must soon give way before the violence of their efforts to go farther.

"Mal," gasped Dan, "isn't that a house over there on our left?"

Malachi Joseph turned sharply at the question of his friend, and a hundred yards or more back from the road he was confident in a moment he could see a curl of smoke rising from the midst of a clump of pine trees.

"Yes," he replied eagerly. "Come on! That means help and hope, Dan."

"You go, Mal. I'll wait here. I'm about done for."

"You must come too, Dan!" said Malachi Joseph positively. He was startled at the signs of exhaustion in his friend, and all the tales he had heard of men freezing crowded upon him. "Come on. You mustn't give up now."

Slowly and painfully Dan began to creep forward. Every step required a fresh effort of his will. His breathing was labored and every breath could be

heard by Malachi Joseph, who was unrelenting in his determination; but at last they gained the house they were seeking and as Dan fell against the door his companion summoned strength sufficient to rap. In a moment the door was opened before them, and hardly aware of the faces that appeared the two young men fell forward into the room.

At first it was impossible for them to make their purpose in coming known, but friendly hands soon had removed their wrappings and were ministering to their wants, and then Malachi Joseph with many pauses at last contrived somehow to tell of the plight of the people on the stalled train and of their own reason for coming in search of aid. The people in the room listened with eagerness, and before the story was all told the owner of the farmhouse and his stalwart son, a young man apparently about nineteen years of age, were equipping themselves for a journey to the people in need.

"Now look here," the man said in response to Malachi Joseph's declaration that he and his friend must also go back to the train, "you can't do that. Not yet, anyway. You couldn't make half the distance; you're too nearly done up. Bige—that's my boy—and I'll take what there is in the house and as we both know how to use snowshoes it won't

bother us much. And we'll follow your tracks so we sha'n't have a bit o' trouble in findin' the train. You lie over for a day or two and then you'll both be all right."

Lose another day? A still further delay? The thought was maddening, impossible. Malachi Joseph assured himself that already he had lost so many days that to add to the number was not to be thought of. And Dan too feebly declared that he must go back or the train would leave.

At last it was agreed that the farmer and his son should at once set forth with all the supplies they could carry and that "mother," for so the man called his good wife, should begin immediately the preparation of additional food, and if the young men really believed themselves equal to the task they were to bring what she prepared, and meanwhile were to rest in the house.

The farmer and his son presented a strange appearance when with their snowshoes bound upon their feet they set forth on their journey. Hams were hanging from their shoulders, bundles swung from their girdles, and each was carrying a huge jug filled with milk.

Malachi Joseph watched the men as they started, both swinging forward surely and easily over the

snow, until they disappeared in the road. When he turned to look at Dan he perceived that his friend was asleep and that the good woman of the house was already busied in her task of preparing additional food for the half-famished passengers. Wearied though he was, Malachi Joseph was unable to follow Dan's example. More even than of the suffering of the people he had recently left he was thinking of Hannah. Every hour of the delay was but increasing his eagerness. Already so much time had elapsed since he had received even a word from her! And his mother's strange silence—what could it mean? The very thoughts of the possibilities which her strange failure to write implied were almost maddening in their uncertainty. He had telegraphed his mother before his departure from Acton and now he blamed himself that he had not followed his prompting to send some word to Hannah herself instead of waiting to deliver his message in person.

The call of the motherly woman as she entered the room where he and his friend were waiting roused Malachi Joseph from his tormenting reveries, and with an effort he arose to meet her.

"Before you go back you and your friend must eat something," she declared.

"We haven't time," responded Malachi Joseph quickly. "The train may be relieved any moment, and I—and we can't be left here."

"I guess the cars won't go off an' leave you," responded the woman with a smile. "Pa is 'most likely there by this time an' he'll tell 'em you are coming. Besides, it will do you both good; and the other man," she added as she glanced at the sleeping Dan, "is 'most tuckered out. You can carry some o' th' victuals inside o' you easier 'n you can outside, and then too, it'll make less to feed when you once get back on the cars."

There was wisdom in the homely suggestion and Malachi Joseph at once aroused his friend—a task by no means easy, as he speedily discovered. But when Dan was at last awake the two young men did ample justice to the feast that had been set before them and then prepared for their return journey. To the two bags or sacks of food which the woman prepared and filled, ropes were attached at her suggestion, and then Malachi Joseph offered to pay her for what she had done.

"You'll have to see Pa about that," she responded. "As far as I'm concerned I'm paid already." Nor would the great-hearted woman accept pay even for that which they themselves had received.

"I tell you, Dan," said Malachi Joseph to his companion when they were once more outside the house, "there are a good many good people in this world. My little work in Acton has shown me that there is a good deal more goodness and a great deal more badness and a sight more of sorrow in this world than I had ever dreamed."

"Yes," responded Dan without a trace of comprehension.

There was no opportunity afforded for conversation now, however, for the strength of the two men was again tested to the utmost. In places they dragged their burden, and then again lifted and helped each other as they plunged forward through the snow. Knowing the distance they must travel now in a measure provided a keener motive for exerting themselves, and whether it was due to that alone or not they had arrived at the place where they were to leave the road sooner than either had expected. There they met the other two men returning, and they at once relieved the wearied young men of their burdens and they themselves carried the bags back to the train.

Malachi Joseph and his friend had not gone far in the woods before they both were startled by a prolonged whistle from the locomotive.

"Dan, they're going to leave us!" gasped Malachi Joseph.

"Come on! We just must make it, Mal," responded Dan as he desperately strove to increase the speed at which he was moving. Malachi Joseph instantly responded to the appeal and exerted himself to his utmost as he plowed through the soft, deep snow. He was thinking of what a delay would mean to him now and no further incentive was required to push him forward. In a brief time they both gained the border of the woods and breathlessly turned toward the place where the train had been stalled.

CHAPTER XVII

TURNERVILLE ONCE MORE

THE train plainly was ready to depart, for the locomotive was panting like a thing alive and the track below was open now, as the presence of two huge snow-plows and a small army of men that had come on the train of flat cars that could be seen beyond plainly indicated. With a shout Malachi Joseph called to his companion, and both began to struggle forward with renewed determination.

The arrival of the two young men was announced by a shout of the people on the cars, and before the food they had brought could be distributed the train itself was in motion, following the snow-plow and the trainload of workmen as they were slowly backed toward the nearest station. As Malachi Joseph peered out from the windows he could see that a cut like a deep canal had been made through the snow and that it was impossible to see above its edges. The fall certainly had been marvelous and the peril of the passengers had not been slight.

Somehow he felt that the response to the desperate efforts of himself and Dan had not been such as he had expected, but in a moment the feeling passed, and he was eagerly watching the mountains of snow through which he was slowly passing. When had good work ever received its full recognition, he thought? No one had understood what the exertions had cost, and how then could any one know their value? It was like all good work, the reward of which never was to be expected in a tangible form as far as appreciation was concerned. The man who was looking for such rewards was certain to be disappointed, human nature being what it was. But the satisfaction in his own heart—ah, that was worth while. It was that which made life worth living. And Malachi Joseph with a smile ceased to think of what his fellow-passengers lacked and as he saw the relief that was manifest all about him at the escape from a peril which had been greater than the most of them understood, his own thoughts again turned toward Turnerville and the great purpose of the journey he was making. Somehow, a feeling of deeper satisfaction too came with the change.

The progress of the train was slow, painfully so to the eager young minister, who found himself

counting the passing hours. Even when Mr. Burt came to him to say good-by he was only partly aware of what the man was saying to him.

"I'm delighted to have seen you, and I hope soon to have that pleasure again. You may see me or hear from me when you are not expecting it. You may try to bury yourself back there in Acton, but we sha'n't let you stay buried. Good-by; good-by, sir."

Malachi Joseph shook Mr. Burt's hand, but apparently he had not understood that there was any deeper meaning in what had been said to him than was apparent in the cordial manner of the former committeeman.

It was late Saturday afternoon when Malachi Joseph at last arrived at Turnerville. As he had thought, no one was at the station to meet him, for the long delay had doubtless caused his devoted little mother to believe that his visit had been postponed. Smilingly the young minister walked rapidly up the street toward his mother's house, and almost as if he were a boy again ran up the steps of the piazza and opened the door.

With a startled cry his mother flung herself upon him and for a long time clung to him as if she was fearful even now the boy whom she had so long

loved and for whom her life had been a continual sacrifice would escape her. And Malachi Joseph's response was warm enough to satisfy even the love of his mother.

At last when she released him and standing before him, her face shining with a light that somehow reminded him of the expression he had come to expect on Aunt Miriam's saintly countenance—a resemblance which was so striking that Malachi Joseph wondered that he had never noticed it before, for not even yet had he become aware of the fact that a vision depends as much upon the eye that sees as it does upon the object that is seen—she demanded the reason for his delay in coming.

Her interest in the story he had to tell of the stalling of the train was not slight, and when at last he had explained all and had gone to his room to prepare for supper, the expression upon her face which her boy had discovered for the first time, was still to be seen.

At the supper-table Uncle Mal was one of the party and as he listened to the account which Malachi Joseph gave of his life and labors in Acton his pleasure was unmistakable.

“Time enough, Mal!” he exclaimed as he pushed his chair back from the table. “You’ll get that big

church yet! Beecher began in some such sort o' a place 's Acton must be, accordin' t' your tell. There's one thing, though, Mal, that's as plain as the nose on your face."

"What's that?" laughed Malachi Joseph, upon whom even his uncle's uncouth ways did not produce their former irritation. He had no thought of even attempting to discuss with his uncle the suggestion implied in his words. He was aware of the change in his own feelings, but of the cause he had no conception.

"Why, it's th' change in yerself, Mal," roared Malachi Joseph the first. "I dunno jist what 'tis, but as I said, it's as plain as the nose on your face. Guess maybe I can tell what 'tis to-morrow after I hear you preach. You must bring out your best sermon, Mal, for the folks are all countin' on hearin' you. Even Hi Turnbull is comin' t' meetin' to-morrow, an' if that doesn't set you up I don't know what will."

"Yes, Mal," explained his mother in response to the glance of surprise of her son. "I told Mr. Day, our minister, that you was coming home and most likely would be here over Sunday, and he said you must occupy the pulpit to-morrow. So everybody is goin' t' come to meeting to hear you."

"All right. I'll do my best not to disappoint you," said Malachi Joseph, wondering at his own willingness, so different from the feeling which had possessed him in former years when similar invitations had come to him. "Now tell me about the people here. Who's married and who's dead? What have you been doing while I have been gone?" Not a word as yet had been spoken concerning Hannah, and for reasons of his own Malachi Joseph had not referred to her, although in response to his general question he was hoping that some of the information he was eager to receive would be given him.

"Oh, Turnerville doesn't change very fast, Mal. You yourself used to say that, an' I guess it's true," said his mother lightly.

"What has become of 'Gene Hawkins?" inquired Malachi Joseph, aware that his questions must be more specific if he was to secure the information he desired and yet still determined to approach his object by a roundabout way.

"'Gene has gone to New York to live with his sister."

"Is that so? Who leads the choir, then?"

"Why, there isn't any regular leader. Hannah used to lead till she went away."

“ ‘Went away’ !” exclaimed Malachi Joseph so quickly that his mother instantly turned her face away. There was a smile too, which was lost, but he was intent upon only one thing now, and consequently was not aware of his loss. “Where has she gone? When did she go?” he demanded quickly.

“Didn’t you know, Mal?” inquired Mrs. Pitt quietly.

“No. I didn’t know anything about her. You never wrote me a word about Hannah, not once in any of your letters,” he said reproachfully.

“If you wanted to know why didn’t you write her yourself?”

“Where is she?” he demanded, ignoring his mother’s question.

“She went to Boston in October.”

“What for?”

“Her uncle’s wife died and he wanted Hannah to come and stay for a spell. So she went. She’s been studying music, I hear. At all events she hasn’t been home once since last October.”

“Do you know where her uncle lives?”

“In Boston.”

“Yes, yes. I know you said that. But where in Boston? What is his address?”

“I never heard that.”

For a brief time Malachi Joseph sat staring at the wall as if he had forgotten that others were in the room with him. He likewise was unaware that his mother was shrewdly watching him and that her face was lighted by a smile that seemingly was indicative of intense pleasure.

"Oh, I did hear from her once—I don't mean directly," began his mother, "but Mrs. Brown told me not long ago that Hannah had met an old friend of yours there."

"Who was it?" inquired Malachi Joseph indifferently, for his thoughts were all busied with the perplexing condition in which he now found himself.

"It was a girl that knew you when you were in Monroe. She's married now, but she said her name used to be Bingham—Gertrude Bingham, if I recollect aright."

"Yes, I knew her," responded Malachi Joseph, a tinge of color creeping over his face as he spoke. It was strange, but the remembrance of Gertrude Bingham now seemed to be as remote as some meaningless experience of his boyhood. "What did she have to say about me?" he inquired at last.

"Who? This girl that Hannah met? Oh, Mrs. Brown didn't tell me anything about that. She just said that Hannah wrote that she had met an

old friend of yours, some one that used to know you when you were a student."

"Yes, she knew me. She's married now. I have forgotten what her name is," said Malachi Joseph as he arose from his seat at the table. "I think I'll go up to my room now. If I'm to speak to-morrow I must get ready."

"Mal," called his mother as he turned away.

"Yes. What is it, mother?" he inquired as he stopped near the doorway.

"Nothing, I guess," she responded in some confusion. "I was thinking I'd say something to you, but I'll wait till to-morrow."

"Will it keep?" he asked with a laugh.

"Yes, Mal. It will keep till to-morrow afternoon."

As her son walked slowly up the stairway Malachi Joseph's mother still was in some perplexity of mind, not knowing whether she was doing right or not in failing to tell her boy that she had heard also that Hannah had been expected home on the preceding day. If she had come then Mrs. Pitt knew that she would be at the service on the following morning, and in that event Hannah doubtless would be able to make for herself any explanations she might desire. The longing, the supreme hope of

the brave little mother of Malachi Joseph found expression in the glance she gave the ceiling of the room above which the measured footsteps of her boy could be heard, who apparently had selected a strange manner of resting after his long and tiresome journey. But when Mrs. Pitt resumed her own labors she was singing softly as she busied herself in her homely tasks. It was late, however, before the sound of the footsteps in the room above ceased to be heard.

The following morning dawned clear and cold, and when Malachi Joseph with his mother and his uncle walked along the street toward the little church the country people could be seen coming from every one of the roads that led into Turner-ville, the runners of their sleighs creaking as they sped over the trodden snow and the breath even of the swiftly moving horses showing plainly in the frosty air. The young minister returned the smiling greetings that were given him by the passers-by, a strange feeling of friendliness manifest in his manner well-nigh as unaccountable to him as it was pleasing to his old acquaintances. All of the irritation he had felt, and perhaps had not entirely concealed on the occasions of his former returns, was gone and in its place was a warmth that seemed

to him almost like a glow. Here in Turnerville as in Acton the problems of life were pressing and the quiet days did not mean that sorrow was less real or the hunger of the heart more easily satisfied than in the cities with their teeming throngs and more complex duties. It may have been also that Malachi Joseph's heart was at rest from itself. At all events late in the preceding night he had settled his own problem by deciding that he too would go to Boston, for to return to Acton without seeing Hannah was impossible.

At the church door Malachi Joseph was met by Mr. Day, and after he had been cordially greeted he was taken at once to the little pulpit and even before he had taken his seat he was aware that the edifice was filled as he had never known it to be before. He glanced at the choir and though he missed the face of Hannah, the very fact that she had once belonged there served to make his heart beat a little more rapidly. The second hymn was being sung and the entire congregation was standing when suddenly Malachi Joseph saw Hannah herself, together with her father and mother, enter the building and proceed down the middle aisle until they were almost in front of the pulpit, where they at last found a pew in which there was

room for them. Malachi Joseph was aware that his face was almost colorless, but Hannah's cheeks were glowing, doubtless from the cold, he thought. At all events when she raised her face her eyes were glowing with a friendly interest and her pleasure and surprise at finding her old-time friend before her. There was nothing in her manner to betray any other feeling, and Malachi Joseph for a moment felt strangely disappointed. The hymn had been sung and the people were now once more taking their seats and with a supreme effort the young minister strove to meet his task. Unaware of the intense interest of his mother, who had seen what others had failed to note when Hannah had entered, ignoring unconsciously the presence of the assembly, gazing into the face of Hannah Brown so intently that in a moment the girl lowered her eyes, Malachi Joseph began to speak. Gradually he became less conscious of himself as he earnestly pictured the scene of Christ healing the man with the palsy. Soon even Hannah's face became only a part of the sea of faces before him. The men and women whose affections had withered, whose hopes had faded, whose joy in living had almost ceased, who found themselves driven to their tasks, with but little in what they were doing that satisfied their deepest

needs—all these he dwelt upon in such a manner that the very secrets of the lives of many before him seemed to reveal themselves in the changes that swept over their countenances. Then his manner changing and the very tones of his musical voice becoming clearer and sweeter in his intensity, Malachi Joseph spoke of the healing and the Healer. The summons to the deadened will, the awakening of the dormant soul, the inspiration of the presence, the object, the method, the reward, the results of life when it had responded to the supreme call were all presented with such a tender appeal that there were few dry eyes in the congregation before him. It was oratory, impassioned, fervid, convincing, and yet Malachi Joseph was not aware of it. He had forgotten himself in his desire to set before this people the discovery he himself had made. At the close the people did not tell him as formerly they had done that "he had given a fine sermon," but eager hands were stretched forth to grasp his and with quivering lips men and women told him that "they had been helped by what he had said that morning." And Malachi Joseph's heart was glowing, for his self-effacement had issued in his self-finding.

Hannah was among the last to come down the

aisle, for Malachi Joseph had not dared to trust himself to seek her at first. As she came near, the young minister was aware that all the pent-up eagerness of his life was expressing itself in his face as he pressed toward her. Never before had the face of the strong-hearted girl seemed to him so beautiful. Quietly she held forth her hand as she said:

"O Mal, I am so glad."

"Hannah," he said simply.

The color faded from her cheeks as she listened, and then she inquired, striving to speak calmly, "When did you come home?"

"Last evening. Do you know why I came, Hannah?"

"I think I do, Mal."

There was a thrill in her low-spoken words that caused Malachi Joseph to forget they were not entirely alone.

"I'm going home to dinner with you, Hannah," he said eagerly.

"That will be quite like old times," she answered with a smile.

"No; not like old times, but like the new—'world without end,'" he said eagerly.

"Mother," he added, as he turned to speak to her. "I'm going home to dinner with Hannah."

She says it will be like the old times, but I tell her it's to be like the new."

"God bless you, my boy," said Mrs. Pitt, her eyes swimming with tears as she patted him on the shoulder for a moment and then turned and simply kissed Hannah.

To the few who saw the act it seemed only the simple expression of an affection which all knew the good woman cherished for the girl who had just returned to her home after a prolonged absence, but Hannah and Malachi Joseph understood.

That afternoon in the plain old farmhouse where Malachi Joseph had spent many of his boyhood days he told Hannah of all the details of his life and work in Acton. When he was done Aunt Miriam, Esther and her mother, Deacon Maxsen, Deacon Griswold, Hen Burdette, and even poor Tom Sanders serving his life sentence, seemed to the girl almost like people she had ever known. And more than that, he told her the old story, as old as Eden, and yet as new as the day's dawn to the one who hears it as Hannah heard it. And it filled the air with music for them both.

"It isn't much money I can promise you, Hannah," said Malachi Joseph at last. "It's hard work and plenty of it, but it's work that makes one glad

he's alive. I know you will not be sorry, for you will find what I have found too. You won't have to find it, Hannah, for you have it already." he quickly added.

"To be where you are, Mal, is all I ask."

"Listen, Hannah," said Malachi Joseph eagerly. "To-morrow I must go on to see the Home Mission officials. I shall be back here by Wednesday at the latest. Will you go back to Acton with me on Thursday?"

"Why, Mal," laughed Hannah, "you're as impatient as you were when you were a boy. I thought you had grown out of all that."

"But will you? Will you, Hannah?" persisted Malachi Joseph. "I know it doesn't give any time for dresses and things. They aren't what I want. I'm a little—a very little like the old apostle, 'I seek not yours, but you.'"

"Do you really want me to go as much as that?"

"I cannot tell you how much I want it! You never can know how I have longed for you to be with me. Every hour I have thought what it would mean to have you there. And now when I know you are to come——"

"Yes, Mal, I will go with you next Thursday," said Hannah quietly.

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